"The true test is when they buy it a second time"
15 Cents EVERY WEEK Jan. 22, 1927

Western Story Magazine

BIG, CLEAN STORIES OF OUTDOOR LIFE

August Eberhardt
John H. Hamlin
George Gilbert
Arthur Preston Hankins
and others

Join The Gasoline War!

Thousands Report More Miles Per Gallon

Now a Queer Little Device is Sweeping The Country Like Wildfire! Over a Million Car Owners Now Use it to Save Gasoline Cost. Thousands Report Startling Savings, Vastly Increased Mileage. J. A. Brest Saved $5.00 in Two Weeks. Zeigler cut his Cost in Half. Learn Here How It Works. Then Try it at the Inventor's Risk.

FORD:—57 miles on a gallon. J. C. Jackson

BUICK:—36 miles on 1¼ gals. Previously made only 8 to 10 miles per gal. L. L. Robinson

MARMON:—Averaged 20 miles per gal. on 492 mile trip. Previously got only 10 to 11 miles. B. O. Finch

DODGE:—36½ miles per gal. David Lawson

STUDEBAKER:—(Special Six) Saved 50% of his former gasoline consumption. F. A. Cole

$137.50 in a Week
Ordered 50 and sold them the first week. O. F. Foster

$48 in 3 Hours
In three hours Saturday I took 16 orders. J. A. Williams

$39 in 3 Hours
In 3 hours on Saturday I cleared $39. In one hour the Saturday before I made $18. T. M. Wiley

MAKE $75 TO $200 A WEEK

WHEN a Ford goes 57 miles on a gallon—a Buick 27 miles—a Marmon doubles former mileage—and thousands report similar records—do you wonder why men earn $75 to $200 in a week, just handing it to car owners?

The Stransky Vaporizer is the most sensational selling proposition of the last ten years. Full page newspaper ads have spread the story all over America. Most car owners have heard about it. Everybody wants to see it. Man alive, what a money-making opportunity!

How It Works

This weird little device has astounded automotive engineers who have tested it. It is simple, easy to understand and install. It tends to save gasoline by a new scientific principle of combustion that multiplies the vapor power of the raw gasoline. Naturally, when gasoline is better vaporized, there is less trouble with carbon. Also, you can now clean out unavoidable carbon in a jiffy because of this device.

Everybody we hear from praises its simplicity, its wonderful savings in gasoline mileage, its fool-proof operation. Many have used it from two to eight years and still praise it. Imagine how wonderful it works when a million car owners install it—when it is sold all over America and in 29 foreign countries—when distributors compete eagerly to get the selling rights.

Cash Forfeit If It Doesn't Satisfy

So convinced is the inventor that this queer device will increase gasoline mileage and reduce carbon troubles that he makes this daring offer described in the coupon below. Obviously, every man will want to accept that offer. It gives you the chance to test this device without risk—and win a cash forfeit if the test doesn't prove the story. It also brings you full details explaining why you can make as big an income, full or spare time, as other Stransky representatives. Why delay? Mail it now.

J. A. STRANSKY Mfg. Co.
Dept. A-1520 Pukwana, South Dakota

READ THIS OFFER

J. A. Stransky Mfg. Co.,
Dept. A-1520, Pukwana, South Dakota.

Yes, I'd like to see a sample of the Stransky Vaporizer at your risk. Also tell me how I can earn $75 to $200 in a week as your distributor. This does not oblige me to buy anything.

Name .....

Street (R.F.D.) .....

City ..... State .....

Western Story Magazine

EVERY WEEK

The entire contents of this magazine are protected by copyright, and must not be reprinted without the publishers' permission

Vol. LXVI Contents for January 22, 1927 No. 5

TWO NOVELS

Boots of Betrayal . . . . . *August Eberhardt* . . 3
Trouble on the Rattletrap . . . *John H. Hamlin* . . . 61

TWO SERIALS

Bucking with Bar C . . . . . *George Gilbert* . . . 26
A Six-part Story—Part Four
Thunder Island . . . . . *Arthur Preston Hankins* . 99
(A Sequel to "The Wife of the Grizzly Bear")
A Six-part Story—Part Six

THREE SHORT STORIES

Desert Doomed . . . . . *Albert William Stone* . . 51
By His Teeth . . . . . *Austin Hall* . . . 116
Footprints Under the Snow . . . *Ray Humphreys* . . . 127

ONE ARTICLE

Pioneer Towns of the West . . . *A. V. Strope* . . . 124
(Colorado Springs, Colo.)

MISCELLANEOUS

Texas-Oklahoma Boundary Still in Question . . 50
Giant Cougar Killed in Rio Grande Valley . . 50
Mexican Shoots Up Nevada Town 123
Preserve Territorial Prison at Yuma 126
New Bridge for Snake River Canyon . . . 126
Masked Bandit's Exploit 140
Yosemite Wigwams Have Radio . . . 140

DEPARTMENTS

The Round-up . . . . . *The Editor* . . . 132
The Hollow Tree . . . . . *Helen Rivers* . . . 135
Where to Go and How to Get There *John North* . . . 138
Puzzling Trails . . . . . *Prosper Buranelli* . . 141
Missing 143

Publication issued every week by Street & Smith Corporation, 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York City. Ormond G. Smith, President; George C. Smith, Vice President and Treasurer; George C. Smith, Jr., Vice President; Ormond V. Gould, Secretary. Copyright, 1926, by Street & Smith Corporation, New York. Copyright, 1926, by Street & Smith Corporation, Great Britain. Entered as Second-class Matter, September 4, 1917, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under Act of Congress of March 3, 1879. Canadian Subscription, $7.50. Foreign, $8.50.

YEARLY SUBSCRIPTION, $6.00 **SINGLE COPIES, 15 CENTS**

In Next Week's Issue of Western Story Magazine

Windy Wanders into Wildcat

A Novelette

By ROBERT ORMOND CASE

"Windy" de Long was looking for adventure when he rode into Wildcat, but the actuality was even more vivid than his hopes had been.

Bar Heart Bar

A Serial

By CLEM YORE

Spanish gold, buried for many generations, involves a fearless man and a beautiful girl in a great adventure.

Shod Without Shoes

By HARLEY P. LATHROP

A great deal depended upon this horse race, and it took strategy to make things right.

And Other Stories : : Order Your Copy Now

Western Story Magazine

EVERY WEEK

Vol. LXVI JANUARY 22, 1927 No. 5

Boots of Betrayal

by August Eberhardt

Author of "Caribou Bill Helps Crosscut John," etc.

THE moment that the fierce din of the riot bell broke through the somnolence of the valley below him, the lumbering, bulky figure of the bareheaded and coatless man came to a sudden halt at the top of the wooded ridge he had been climbing. He turned in his tracks and peered across the mile of brush and swamps that lay between him and the river shore. Silhouetted against the burnished-steel glint of the river rose the shadowy outlines of a long straggling row of log cabins and false-fronted store buildings that comprised the little Northern mining center and the seat of the fifth judicial district of Alaska.

Down there, in quick succession, numbers of narrow cabin windows began to glow through the gentle dusk of the arctic summer night in response to the frantic clamor of the bell. As wayward eddies of a fanning breeze carried the sound to the shaggy, half-clad figure on the hill it swelled in volume, in intensity, and in the insistence of its warning cry: *Alarm! Alarm! Alarm!*

The cause for all of this riot of discordant peals lay in the fact that Old Dad Warner, the night guard at the Federal jail, had failed to realize that

a man, for whom the law had measured out a future of exactly six more days, is a person who enjoys the dreadful immunity of the damned; that such a one cannot possibly injure himself by any act or deed. The old man had not thought of this when, single-handedly, he entered the steel cell of his star prisoner, Solomon Bixbee, better known as "Bigfoot" Bixbee, notorious killer—when he saw the latter in an apparent attempt to reduce his remaining six days of grace to something like six minutes.

As a result of his impulsive and foolish action, Old Dad's own future, after entering the cell of the condemned man, was suddenly and swiftly cut to a very few seconds of time. And as a further result, Bigfoot Bixbee was enabled to listen from across the space of a mile of almost impassable swamps to the alarm caused by his latest murder and consequent escape.

Bigfoot sat down upon a fallen log and raised a hairy hand to wipe the perspiration from his narrow brow. No need to hurry now! He had attained what, during eight months of incarceration, he had hoped to gain—he had laid a mile between himself and the steel tank in the Federal jail.

A mile of a start amidst a whole continent of almost unpeopled wilderness! The forest of red whiskers surrounding the killer's face parted to give expression to a disdainful chuckle as he listened to the furious racket of the bell. He knew that, among the crowd of miners and shopkeepers that were even now forming into a posse for his recapture, there was not a man as thoroughly acquainted with the waste spaces of the North as was Bigfoot himself. The wilderness was his element, the place where he felt thoroughly at home and superior to any number of his pursuers. It mattered little to him how many men might set out in search of him, for they must all travel in the same laborious manner that he did. No mounted men could penetrate the thickets of swamp spruce, alder and willows; and across the vast, level stretches of swamp only a moose could hope to hurry. Only a moose—and Bigfoot Bixbee, who, during half a life spent in eluding the law, had acquired an uncanny skill in leaping from hummock to hummock, each time landing with his broad foot squarely upon the shaggy, dark top of the headlike protuberance.

There was only one method by which his pursuers might reach him. And that was by tracking him down with the help of bloodhounds. But that danger, Bigfoot knew, did not exist for him. For, though there were many more dogs in the North than people, Bigfoot had never heard of any of these dogs being able to follow a man scent. Bloodhounds were not among the breeds of dogs which Alaskans found generally useful. Thus, having nothing to fear from them, Bigfoot, in the knowledge that he could elude any posse by reason of his superiority as a woodsman, believed that his execution would have to be permanently postponed and that—general health not failing—he had as good a chance to attain to a ripe age as any of his pursuers.

Bigfoot Bixbee reached into his pocket and drew from it a key and a plug of tobacco. Both articles had belonged to the late and, at present, much-lamented Dad Warner. The key, which had unlocked for him the outer jail door, Bigfoot flung into the brush as of no longer any account; but he took a generous bite of the tobacco. As he rolled the stimulating morsel between his jaw and cheek, Bigfoot deplored the fact that there had not been anything else about the small person of Old Dad of which a fellow of his own bulky size could have made use. A coat, for instance, would be a handy

article now, nor would a cap come amiss in this mosquito-infested country. But, above all, Bigfoot felt the lack of adequate footwear for the long trail that was to lead him to complete security in his hidden retreat in the mountains.

The killer stretched forth his legs and viewed with misgiving a pair of daintily embroidered carpet slippers that incased his enormous feet. These slippers had been presented to him by a number of sympathetic ladies upon the occasion of his latest and, supposedly, final birthday, a few weeks before. They were perfectly adequate footwear to be hanged in, Bigfoot reasoned; but, for a man who faced crossing some sixty miles of pathless wilderness in a fervent endeavor to escape the noose, they inspired little confidence.

Bigfoot sighed as he looked at his feet. They represented at once his strength and his weakness. Upon these broad soles and spreading toes he could mush tirelessly for days on end. Time and again he had eluded the clutches of the law by the swiftness and endurance of his feet. But, he remembered with regret, it was also because of the gigantic tracks left by them that he had finally been captured. All of his life he had found it difficult to obtain the proper covering for these Cyclopean feet. While most of his other wants were easily supplied by occasional raids on small, isolated camps, or by falling heir to the possessions of some lonely prospector or traveling fur buyer—whose demise he had helped to accelerate—the estate of none of his victims had, so far, included the precious item of a pair of boots of a size to fit the killer's huge feet.

To be correct, there had been one exception to this rule. But, in that particular case, Bigfoot had been unable to profit by what, for the moment, had seemed like a piece of great good fortune. The incident had happened eight months earlier, shortly after the first snowfall, when he had foolishly allowed himself to get into a scrape which roused the country against him and caused a reward to be offered for his capture, dead or alive. With a foot of freshly fallen snow upon the ground to record his movements as upon a chart, Bigfoot had found it inadvisable to retire to his accustomed hiding place. The pursuit after him had become general and insistent, and Bigfoot was aware that the alarm had been spread to the most isolated places. When, therefore, upon turning a bend on a frozen creek, the killer saw "Skookum" Joe Hollister, the road-house keeper, some hundred feet ahead and in the act of wrangling with the frozen strap of a moosehide rifle case, he had guessed what might be on Skookum's mind, so did not stop to make sure by asking; but sent a bullet through the road-house man's forehead before the latter had pulled the covering from his rifle.

It was when he approached the still form of his victim as he lay on his back in the snow, that Bigfoot became aware of the enormous size of the dead man's upturned boots. They were new, he observed, custom made and the only pair of boots Bigfoot had yet seen that were large enough to fit him. The sight of the coveted, priceless treasure had intrigued the slayer to the extent of forgetting that his pursuers were hard upon his heels. He had knelt down beside the body, had removed the boots, and was in the act of exchanging them for his own home-made and ragged moccasins, when he found himself surrounded and captured by the pursuing posse.

The scene of the murder and of his own capture had been but a short distance from Skookum Joe's home. Before he had been led away by the marshal, Bigfoot had watched a detachment

of the posse carry the inert body of his victim up to his house where his widow lived. And he distinctly remembered seeing one member of the dreary cortège carrying the Brobdingnagian boots of the deceased.

Confronted now with the impossible task of traveling in a pair of carpet slippers over nearly sixty miles of the roughest going, the memory of Skookum Joe's boots filled the killer's mind as objects most ardently to be desired. He wondered vaguely if they had buried the man in those priceless shoes. If not, they were, most probably, still in the possession of the widow, who—as is the way with widows—would treasure such tangible remains of her late husband. Bigfoot had heard that Mrs. Hollister, an able and courageous frontierswoman, had not abandoned the road house after her husband's death, but endeavored, by her lone effort, to make a living out of the trade that passed on the winter trail.

Mrs. Hollister's road house lay close along the route which Bigfoot intended to take. It was some ten miles distant—just the stretch that he allowed his slippers might hold out——

The early morning sun had just risen above the snow-crowned mountains to the northeast, when Bigfoot cautiously approached the rim of the woods and peered down upon the small clearing above the river bank. Tied to the steep shore a fish wheel creaked dolefully as it turned slowly in its ungreased, wooden bearings, while its dripping wire netting glistened in the early rays. The clearing above the river was occupied by a large, low-roofed, one-story log house. Behind the house spread a vegetable garden, while just above the river bank a long row of empty dog kennels indicated the character of the place as a road house catering to winter travelers.

For a short time Bigfoot surveyed the silent place, then boldly he stepped from the concealing forest and walked down into the clearing. He had not advanced more than a few steps in the dew-covered grass before the house when, suddenly, he stood as if petrified, while a fervent oath hissed through his bearded lips. Across the space and right in front of the house the black head of a lop-eared dog had appeared above the tall grass. Presently the dog's head disappeared and the grass began to wave in a straight line toward the fugitive. The latter stood undecided whether to turn back or approach, for he expected momentarily to hear the dog give the alarm. He was soon made easy on that point, when the dog emerged from the tall grass in front of him and took up a position on his hind legs, while he offered a stick of wood that he held between his teeth. The dog, a beautiful, long-haired spaniel of the retriever type, looked up to the stranger with loyal, brown eyes, while he offered his stick of wood in welcome, as if it were the key to the house.

A satirical grin broadened the killer's face as he reached down to pet and make friends with the dog.

"Oh, that's the kind o' dog you are!" he muttered. "Well, I might have known it, seein' you was a spaniel. Bummest dogs on earth, that's your kind. Everybody's friend an' good only to fetch a duck outn the water, or sniff out a grouse that's been lost in the brush. M-m—you suit me all right. No! I don't want your stick. Keep it in your mouth, it'll stop you from barkin'."

Confidently now, the killer crossed the grass-grown clearing. The dog followed, carrying his stick of wood and wagging his fine, crescent-shaped tail in welcome to the new-made friend.

Under the rustic porch of the log house the man came to a halt. Right above his head dangled the feathered

bodies of four willow grouse suspended from the end of a rafter. Bigfoot eyed them fondly and then turned to the door. The entrance to the log house was closed by a screen door alone—the heavy winter door being permanently out of use during the summer months. For a moment Bigfoot stood and peered through the screen into the large guest room that was lit by several windows. It represented the interior of a typical road house. Along two sides of the room stretched double rows of curtained bunks, imitating, in a primitive way, the arrangements of a Pullman sleeper; while a large, oilcloth-covered table took up the space in front of the two windows at the farther end of the room. The center of the room was occupied by an immense oil drum, converted into an able heater. On one side two doors opened into smaller rooms; and between them the wall was covered with trophies of the hunt. The beautifully symmetrical antlers of a caribou served as a rack for a shotgun and a rifle.

At the sight of these guns a glint of eagerness came into the killer's eyes. Carefully he swung the screen door on its hinges, fearing to hear it creak. It proved well oiled, however, just as all arrangements pointed to a neat and industrious housekeeping. Upon the wet rags of his torn carpet slippers, Bigfoot slipped noiselessly into the room and made directly for the gun rack. The shotgun, which he broke, proved empty, but from the magazine of the rifle gleamed the familiar yellow of brass shells.

Once more in possession of a loaded gun, Bigfoot stepped confidently toward the nearest door and peered through the crack. It proved to be the kitchen. Approaching the second door, which was only partly shut, he heard the regular breathing of a sleeping person. As he slowly swung the door upon its wooden hinges he looked into a small room that was partly darkened by drawn blinds. He entered without noise and stood beside a broad bed. Against the gleaming white of the pillow rested the head of a woman, her long, black hair spread loosely over the pillow and coverlet. For a moment Bigfoot looked down upon the quietly sleeping figure. She was not a pretty woman—to judge by the usual standards of beauty. Hard work and sorrow had left their marks upon her features, and even the semidarkness of the room could not conceal the silver among her black locks. Even while relaxed in sleep the woman's face gave evidence of courage and will power; it was almost a manly face, though softened by the unmistakable marks of kindness around her broad, homely mouth.

Bigfoot's gaze traveled from the woman's head to the wall above her. Instantly he bent across the sleeping form and took hold of the businesslike looking revolver he saw hanging there. As he bent back, he saw the woman staring up at him with wide open, terrified eyes. The killer grinned in response.

"Here's hopin' that you had a pleasant rest, ma'am!" he offered by way of greeting.

The woman made no answer—just kept staring up at him as if she hoped that this were all a horrible nightmare. Suddenly her eyes turned to the wall where a moment before the gun had hung. Finding it gone she seemed to realize, at last, that the situation was not a dream.

"Bigfoot—Bixbee!" she stammered at last. "Why—I—I thought——" She became silent once more and stared in helpless terror at the savage face above her.

"That I was goin' to be hung next week?" Bigfoot completed the sentence as he beamed down upon her with an ugly leer.

"What do you want?" the woman asked tremblingly, raising herself to a sitting posture. "Haven't you done enough harm to this house? Have you come to take revenge on me now?"

The last question caused a look of mild reproach to enter the squinting eyes of the killer. He executed a dramatic gesture with his hands.

"Ma'am, you got me all wrong there. Solomon Bixbee ain't the man to carry a grouch jest because you was a witness aginst me at my trial. Why, ma'am, I reckon you had a right to testify aginst me, seein' as it was me as made a widder outn you. Besides, if it warn't yours, they had a dozen cases on me—any one o' them would have done me jest as plenty as the one for killin' Skookum Joe. They picked on that because it seemed easy to handle an', likewise, it was the last killin' I made—that is," he added momentarily as if struck by a sudden memory, "the last killin' I made up to that time."

"Great heavens!" the woman exclaimed, "you haven't been killing any one since then?"

"Jest a little feller this time, ma'am—an old man as hadn't much more time to live anyway," Bigfoot explained by way of mitigation for his latest murderous exploit. "'Twas necessary to put him out of the way, as otherwise you might have missed the pleasure of havin' me offer the top of the mornin' to you."

Unspeakable loathing was expressed on the woman's face as she looked up at the man for a silent moment.

"What did you come for then?" she asked.

"This bein' a road house, I reckon you ain't usually in the habit to ask perspective guests what they comes for," he parried. "Why all this questionin', Missus Hollister, ma'am? Like many others as stop here I'm attracted by the fame of your cookin', of course. Howsomever, I'd like to have it impressed on your mind that I got a hurry date som'ere else; an' the sooner you can manage to present me with a sample of your cul'nary art the better it'll be for the both of us."

There was a wicked glint in the killer's eyes as he spoke. And for all his facetious language, the woman realized that this man, who thought no more of killing a man than of shooting a moose, would not hesitate a moment to take the life of even a woman should she dare to obstruct his reckless path.

"I'll get up and prepare you something to eat as soon as you'll leave the room," the road-house keeper hastened to reply.

There was a pained expression in the killer's face as he swept her with a reproachful glance.

"Now, that warn't necessary, ma'am, to tell me to get out of here so you could dress. I knows my manners as a gentleman, an' it war my aim to leave you so you could complete your toilet. I'm a respecter of wimenhood, ma'am—leastways, I am when that same wimenhood is represented by a lady of your age an' appearance," he added by way of compliment as he passed out of the room.

When Mrs. Hollister appeared in the large guest room a few minutes later, she found Bigfoot sitting by the table with his lacerated feet immersed in a tub of water, while the loaded revolver he had taken off the wall lay beside his elbow.

"I calls that pronto, the way you get ready to serve yore guests, ma'am," he greeted her cheerfully.

"What d'you want for your breakfast?" the woman asked resignedly.

The killer's face distended in a pleased grin.

"Now, that's a question I didn't expect to hear till the mornin' six days to come. An' I have a hunch that I mightn't have enjoyed it half so big as

hearin' you ask it under changed cercumstances an' a safe stretch ahead of the legal date set for it. Howsomever, since you have the goodness to ask, I'd like to make bold to indicate that fried grouse breast is the article for which I am parshial. I seen you got four of them critters—h'm-m—hangin' from the end of the rafter outside. Four grouse breasts bein' the usual porshun I breaks my fast with, I reckon that I'll stick to my former habits in startin' on this new an' unexpected lease of life. You needn't bother pickin' their feathers, either. Jest pull off their skins an' throw them in the pan with a slice or two of bacon."

The woman had already disappeared through the front door and presently she returned to the kitchen with the skinned birds, whose meat looked yellow with the fat that covered them at this season.

While the savory odor of frying grouse and bacon had reached him from the kitchen, Bigfoot took his feet from the tub and started upon a tour of investigation around the room. Lifting the curtains of the two end bunks near the door he found that they had been converted into a clothes closet. It was all men's clothing that the closet contained, and of a size that made it an easy guess that it had formerly graced the giant figure of Skookum Joe, whom he had killed. Bigfoot was not troubled with sentimental scruples as he slipped into a woolen Mackinaw, which fitted him exactly. And from the bottom of the closet he fished out the identical pair of boots whose attraction for him had been instrumental in his capture. He treated them like long-lost friends, fondled them, petted them, and finally immersed his huge feet in them. They, also, proved a perfect fit. A moment later he admired himself before the glass with Skookum's hat sitting at a rakish angle upon his unruly hair.

Just then the woman entered with a platter containing the fried grouse breasts. Her eyes flashed with indignation as she set the food on the table.

"Ain't you got no feelings at all, man?" she asked. "Would you actually wear the clothes of the man you killed?"

"Feelin'?" echoed her unbidden guest as he turned to her with a bland look on his face. "Why, woman, it's because my feet has terrible feelin's that I make so bold as to use them vacant boots to pertect them aginst further damage. What is a good pair of boots for, if not to use them?"

"Dead man's boots!" the woman snapped.

"The only kick I got comin' aginst dead man's boots, ma'am," he returned with composure as he sat down and pulled the boots off his feet again, "is the fact that they shows a tendency to become more stiff an' more dry the further the date of their late owner's activity drops back in the calendar. Them here fine boots of your own, onfortunate an' bygone husban's seems no exceptshun to the roole. An' I'd consider it an extra speshial favor if you'd apply your persuashun in softenin' them. Seein' as how good a housewife you are I have no doubt that you could do it."

There was a murderous yearning in the woman's eyes as her glance rested for a moment on the revolver by the man's elbow. Presently she seemed to think better of it, however, and, picking up the boots, carried them back to the kitchen without a word of comment.

Bigfoot had finished his breakfast by the time the road-house keeper returned with the boots; but a glance at them fully justified the extra delay it had taken to promote their flexibility. They shone from soles to tops with the richness and the earnestness of the greasy massage they had received.

Even the bottom of the soles had been thoroughly anointed, while the seams were filled with lustrous traceries of golden grease. Bigfoot did not stint his praise for such a perfect job as he lovingly stroked the velvety surface of the uppers:

"Ma'am!" he exclaimed with supreme satisfaction, "you are a joo'el of a housewife."

Then, as the woman had left the room, he took a box of cartridges which he put in his pocket. A sheath knife seemed likewise to have struck his fancy, for, a moment later, it adorned his belt, where it made an appropriate counter for the borrowed revolver. Then, taking up the rifle, he cast one more glance around the room evidently in an endeavor to ascertain if he had not forgotten something, when finally he strolled through the door, he saw the road-house keeper watching his departure with guarded relief.

He lifted the trim hat that had once afforded cover for the slow-moving ideas of the unfortunate Skookum Joe, and bowed toward the woman with the grace of a mule.

"Ma'am," he called over to her, "I shore enjoyed the hospitality of your roof an' it is with regrets that I takes my leave to foller the lure of the trail. You may guess that in my hurried checkin' out o' the Gov'ment hotel over there"—he jerked his thumb in the direction of the town—"I've plump overlooked the matter of my wallet. An' so, all I can offer you for your generosity to a distressed wayfarer is my thanks. Howsomever, since legally an' technically I'm still supposed to be under Gov'ment pertecshun, Uncle Sam will likely have to fork over for any debts contracted by his ward. I reckon the marshal an' his bunch of rowdies'll be here before long, an' you can get more reliable information from them about the matter of my bill. When you see them give them my love from me. Ta—ta!"

Thus brimming over with good cheer the happy wayfarer disappeared in the direction of the winter trail that led by the road house.

Two hours after the genial killer had taken his departure, the marshal arrived at the road house with a posse. After listening to Mrs. Hollister's report of her experience with the fugitive murderer, the marshal turned to his men and for a moment regarded them in a critical survey.

"Boys," he addressed the group before him, "you have heard what Mrs. Hollister had to say. We all know that Bigfoot is as good a woodsman and a better musher than any of us. This is summertime; and between here and the coast lies an unpeopled wilderness of more than ten thousand square miles, with plenty of game for him to live on. A whole regiment of soldiers would have no better chance of finding him than a few well-selected men, experienced in the ways of the woods and able to read a trail. I need but a few men to help me in this chase, but they must be real woodsmen and not afraid to rough it for a few days, or even weeks, if necessary. So," concluded the marshal with astute comprehension, "if there's any among you boys whose business won't allow him to stay away from town for any length of time, or who feels unequal to the hardships of the chase, he is welcome to go back to town."

A number of the men availed themselves of the marshal's proposal. Some of these, mostly tradesmen and saloon hangers-on, had come, eager for the thousand-dollar reward that was immediately offered after the murderer's escape. To others, the chase of the unarmed killer had appeared in the light of a welcome and, perhaps, profitable adventure. But now, with the

knowledge that the killer—who also had a reputation as a crack shot—was well armed and able to defend himself, the adventure had lost much of its lure.

"Black" Tom Darby, the marshal himself a trail blazer of the first order —watched the return to town of more than half of his force without show of emotion either way. It was not until the men had disappeared beyond the clearing that he turned his lionlike head, framed in a great, black beard, and identified with a smile of satisfaction in his keen, dark eyes the five loyal followers who had remained with him.

"Good," he said, "now we can do business! There ain't no need to rush, for there is none among us who could overtake Bigfoot in a race, nor can we hope to follow his tracks after the sun has dried the dew off the grass. The only chance we have of catching Bigfoot is by putting ourselves in his place, by figuring what we would do, where we would try to hide if we were in the position of the fugitive. Seein' that all you boys have plenty of sourdough experience this shouldn't prove such a difficult job. That way we're bound to run across the man sooner or later, or, at least, meet with his tracks. And, if these are at all visible, they can never be mistaken for any one else's tracks."

" 'Twould be a fine thing, though." suggested the "Grizzly Kid," a short, lively little man, who enjoyed the reputation of the biggest bear hunter in the country, " 'twould be a fine thing if we had a bloodhound to set on this fellow's trail."

The marshal nodded. "Yeah," he acknowledged, "a bloodhound would come handy now. But as far as I know there ain't any such animal in the country. For one reason, a bloodhound would be useless during eight months of the year while the snow lies on the ground—besides, he probably couldn't stand the cold. And during the four summer months everybody travels by water, even a fugitive from justice. This is the first time I've known a man to flee across country in the summer, and likewise the only time that I have felt the lack of a man-trailing hound."

"If it's a man-hunting dog you are looking for, marshal, I believe I can fix you up along that line."

The offer came from Mrs. Hollister, who had appeared before the door of the road house dressed for the trail in the manner of the men whom she addressed.

"What? You got a bloodhound here?" the marshal asked in surprise.

"Not a bloodhound exactly, but a dog that I guarantee will follow Bigfoot's trail for a day or two at least," the woman replied.

"Why, that'd be all we need to make sure to surprise the fellow at the very next place he goes to camp. Let's have a look at the dog."

Mrs. Hollister opened the screen door, through whose meshes the spaniel had for some time been gazing eagerly at the strangers. Now he bounded through the open doorway and made straight for the group of men, anxious to express his friendship to each of them in turn.

For a moment the men watched the dog cutting his crazy capers, when suddenly they realized that this was the dog for whom the road-house keeper had made the extravagant claim of a man hunter. Then the whole group of them broke out into a roar of laughter. Even the marshal's usually earnest face broadened into an amused smile.

"I don't mean any offense, madam," he chuckled, "but I got ten fine Malemutes in my kennels; and, if it came to picking any old dog to set on a man-trail, I think that I'd prefer them to what you got to offer here."

The woman accepted the ridicule good-naturedly. "I don't blame you boys for laughing at my dog as a man-hunter, because these qualities are not

usually found in a dog of his breed," she said. "But Blacky here is different, and when I claim that he can keep on the trail of Bigfoot, I don't mean maybe. I have an idea that he's going to earn for me some of the reward money that's out for the murderer of my husband. I'll have to come along with you, though, to keep the dog to his job in case we meet with game on the trail."

The marshal seemed unconvinced and not particularly pleased to have the woman join the chase. "You realize Mrs. Hollister," he warned her, "that we may have to put up with a lot of hardships and even dangers in case we meet the murderer. We won't be able to make allowance for a lady——"

"Pshaw!" the woman interrupted. "You and every one of your men knows me as a woman that is able to take a man's part in the woods or on the trail. I'll not ask nor need any special favors because of my sex, but I believe that I can keep up with any man in the posse."

The marshal had no longer any objections to offer. "All right," he said, "we'll give your dog a trial, and you can always return with him if he proves no better than what he looks."

A few minutes later Mrs. Hollister returned from the house shouldering a light pack containing a sleeping bag and other articles necessary for camping out. She called the dog to her and led him to the spot where Bigfoot's huge tracks were visible in the soft soil of the vegetable garden, which he had crossed after leaving the road-house keeper.

"Here, Blacky, go find him!" she called, pointing to the tracks at her feet.

The dog put his nose close to the ground and sucked in the air in quick, short sniffs, and then started to trot excitedly along the trail left by the killer. Mrs. Hollister and the men followed in Indian file.

Shortly they arrived at the winter trail, where the dog turned unhesitatingly to the left, the direction which the fugitive had so far followed. The ground being soft in places, his tracks, which he seemed to have taken no trouble to conceal, were frequently apparent.

"The dog seems to follow the man's tracks all right," the marshal commented approvingly. "If he can keep this up, Bigfoot won't enjoy his liberty for very long."

The Grizzly Kid did not yet seem convinced. "It's nuthin' outn the ord'nary fer a common dog ter foller a man's track fer a while. It's in the long run where the trained, man-huntin' hound counts. This here retriever is liable ter run along this track fer an hour or more, especially as long as it stays on the winter trail; but I bet my boots that as soon as the dog crosses the first game trail he'll ferget all about what he started on."

"Don't be too sure, Kid!" the woman called back from the head of the file. "That's just what I'm coming along for —to set the dog right in case he gets off on the wrong scent."

The winter trail, leading from the interior of Alaska to the coast, represented exactly what its name implied. It was certainly never intended for summer travel; and it was only where it led through forested, or brush-covered areas that its existence, in summer, was at all apparent. In those places the timber and brush had been cut down to the height of a foot above ground, in a lane wide enough to allow plenty of room for the four-horse weekly stage to pass. Out in the open places, across the numerous shallow swamps and broad stretches of niggerheads, the direction of the winter trail was now and then indicated by a few stakes planted in the ground. The trail offered not the slightest attempt

at grading; no bridges spanned the numerous sloughs and creeks which it crossed; and the only cognizance the trail took of these obstacles was in that it frequently bent and turned to pick out the fords across the watercourses, where the shores were low enough to allow the stage to cross on the ice.

For more than an hour the party, with the dog in the lead, followed the lane cut through the woods. By degrees, as the trail led away from the vicinity of the river, the stately forest that had graced its shores deteriorated into a meager growth of crippled trees and bushes. Frequently, now, the trail crossed large open spaces that looked like meadows, but which, upon approach, proved treacherous bogs, whose elastic carpet of moss and decayed vegetable matter the party crossed with hurried steps. It was in those places that the tracks of the fugitive were most plainly and persistently apparent. And it was there also that the party gained confidence in the dog's abilities as a man hunter, when they saw him steadily trotting along the line of the clearly marked footprints.

The stately birch trees, which had enlivened with their silver sheen the somber wall of dark spruce along the river, had long since disappeared from sight. Their places were taken by bent and crippled alders and willows. These grew more bent, more dwarfish and stunted as the distance lengthened between them and the flowing water, until, at last, only isolated specimens of swamp spruce were left, their bare trunks—scarce the thickness of an arm—covered with lichens and pitchy protuberances. These trees, however, represented the slow, arctic growth of centuries. Beyond a broad fringe of dwarfish black willows all signs of the trail became lost in the wide, level stretch of niggerheads that confronted the man hunters.

Way in the distance the niggerhead plain appeared like a wintry meadow of dried and bleached grass. Nearer at hand, it resolved itself into myriads of tiny hummocks, like vast herds of grazing sheep. It was only upon close approach that the diabolical character of the ground formation could be appreciated—and cursed—by the eager pursuers. Like a party of drunken revelers they stumbled and staggered through that maze of headlike protuberances which, as a whole, represented nothing so much as an enormous, close-toothed harrow. Every few steps, one or the other of the party would measure the ground with the length of his body. And hands and faces were soon thickly coated with the black, slimy ooze that formed the floor of the niggerhead plain. After an hour of painful stumbling about, the marshal looked back upon the half mile of progress that they had made amidst this difficult terrain and remarked:

"It's right here that Bigfoot will gain a couple of hours on us. He's the only man I know who has developed such sure-footedness that he can run along the tops of these humps and cross a niggerhead plain with the speed of a moose."

"He must have lost much of his skill then, since he was in jail," Mrs. Hollister, who was in the lead, turned to reply. "I have seen his tracks frequently between the niggerheads, and sometimes even the print of his hands where he has slipped and fallen."

"That, I think, is because he's wearing stiff-soled boots instead of the moccasins to which he is used," the marshal commented.

"I have an idea that these boots will prove his undoing yet," the woman remarked as she turned to follow the dog, who, thanks to his four feet and claws, found little difficulty in staying on top of the head-shaped, black humps.

After crossing a number of languid, shallow sloughs that traversed the nig-

gerhead plain, the party arrived at the foot of a long, gentle slope, where the going was comparatively good. For hours they traveled between isolated clumps of cottonwood trees, spruce and tamarack, between which the ground was everywhere covered with the rampant growth of the low-bush blueberry, whose luxuriant, ripe fruit lent a bluish tint to the entire landscape. Here the party was dependent exclusively upon the dog as guide, for the fugitive's tracks could no longer be determined on the ground over which they traveled. The numerous places where the ripe berries had been mashed into the short moss was no sure indication that Bigfoot had gone that way—the tracks might have been caused by a passing bear, of which the party sighted several in this area of luscious berries.

Game birds, also, frequented this enormous berry patch in large numbers; and several times it became necessary for the party to delay and allow the dog to regain his mental equilibrium and a sense of the duty imposed on him, after he had flushed a flock of ptarmigan or a covey of pin-tailed grouse.

It was past noon by the time that the posse arrived at the level of the extensive plateau whose slope they had been climbing for the past few hours. Here they came to a halt while they surveyed the country around and below them. In the direction from which they came stretched the broad valley of the river whose course was indicated mainly by the dark belt of timber that girded its shores. Beyond that fringe of forest the vast stretches of treacherous, moss-covered bogs and fields of niggerheads appeared at this distance like pleasant green meadows, broken by hedges of brush and dotted by occasional oases of somber swamp spruce.

Upon their right, the stern ruggedness of the scene was represented by a towering, snow-crowned chain of mountains that frowned like a chill Olympus upon the primordial wilderness below. Volcanic in their origin were some of these peaks, as was attested by the symmetry of a number of ermine-cloaked cones. Apparently they were dead, or dormant volcanoes; but above one of them, at least, a telltale wisp of grayish smoke hovered like a sinister threat.

Against the vastness of the all-embracing wilderness the task of locating the fugitive murderer seemed hopeless. Something of the thought must have stirred the marshal's mind as he turned from the broad scene and fixed his eyes questioningly upon the dog, who lay stretched in the grass. The latter seemed to sense the unspoken appeal, for he returned the marshal's gaze with what looked like a reassuring glance from his loyal, brown eyes and thumped his tail upon the ground to punctuate his promise.

In their further progress, the party skirted the tail ends of a number of terminal moraines of glaciers that had long since retreated within the fastnesses of snow-walled mountain gorges. In the distance ahead of them one of those silent and impressive mementoes of a glacier's former greatness and extent rose above the level of the plateau like a faithful replica of a giant railway embankment. Starting from the blue-tinted face of one of the largest glaciers that sprawled lazily in the ivory lap of a mountain, it reached far down into the plain and cut the straight line of the winter trail, forcing it to detour for some miles to the left.

For a foot musher, however, the enormous wall of gravel, rocks and boulders proved no barrier. And that Bigfoot had recognized this fact and had essayed a short-cut across the ridge was shown when the dog kept right on his way for the frowning rock wall at the point where some stakes indicated the turn of the trail to the left.

The approach of the party was greeted by a succession of shrill, piercing whistles from the rock-wall ahead of them, followed by an angry chattering as the many ground hogs, that had been sunning themselves upon the rocks, disappeared in their holes among the loose boulders.

"Here's the place where we're goin' ter lose the services of a man-huntin' dog," the Grizzly Kid remarked sarcastically as he pointed to the dog, who stood eagerly watching a ground hog that chattered defiance at the party from the rim of a boulder above them.

Mrs. Hollister shook her head reassuringly: "He's rabbit proof," she returned. Then, gently stroking the dog's silken head, she urged: "Come now, Blacky, come and follow the tracks and forget about those whistlers."

The dog seemed to understand, for he raised his head to sniff the top of the lowest boulder, leaped to it, and continued climbing the slanting sixty-foot wall of loose rocks.

"I'll sure call him some dog if he can cross this whistler colony without gettin' crazy," the little bear hunter offered doubtingly by the time the party stopped on top of the moraine to catch their breath.

The surface of the gigantic embankment was some hundred yards in width and consisted of an aggregation of large boulders, packed so close that traveling along the top of the moraine offered little difficulty. Geologically speaking, the moraine seemed of recent origin, for the interstices between the boulders were not yet filled with soil from the decaying rock; and, beyond a thin film of grayish lichens, the surface of the rock wall was absolutely barren of any sort of vegetation.

While the members of the posse took their brief breathing spell the dog kept on scenting his way forward from rock to rock until, out in the middle of the rock pile, he gave evidence of having lost the scent he had been following. Twice he retraced his steps upon the rocks, advancing again each time to a spot where the scent seemed to evaporate in thin air. Finally the dog scrambled about in a circle, sniffing eagerly, when, suddenly, he issued a low whine and followed with evident determination a direction that led away at right angles from their former course and pointed toward the frowning snow mountains to their right.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" exclaimed the marshal in disgust. "Now he's lost his head."

"He's got the whistlers on his brain," the Grizzly Kid commented wearily. "I tol' you, he'd give out sooner or later. It's a wonder he held out that long an' quite a credit fer the breed o' dog he belongs to."

Mrs. Hollister shook her head determinedly. "If Blacky turns up the moraine that means that Bigfoot has gone that way," she pronounced with confidence.

"But, madam," the marshal remonstrated, "what would he want to do up there? He can't hope to cross that mountain range. It's thirty miles of snow and glaciers between here and the opposite slope. With no game to kill and no chance of building a fire, it is certain death for any man who ventures up among those mountains. And, further, if he did want to turn into the mountains, why did he not do so from the start? Why did he mush all this distance only to turn almost back on his tracks to enter the mountains at a place that offers about the most difficult approach of any we have so far passed. No, missus," the marshal clinched his argument by a sweeping gesture of his hand in the direction of the wilderness before them, "with the finest game country in the North to offer him a refuge the man would be crazy to turn into the mountains where

he can look for nothing but starvation and cold."

The marshal's peroration did not seem to affect the woman's confidence in her dog's ability to follow the fugitive's track. She argued:

"Solomon Bixbee is no fool. He probably guessed that you'd look for him first at the places that seem to offer the best advantage for a fugitive; and now he's doing the unexpected, the thing that he knows you'd consider a crazy attempt. As for the reason that he hasn't turned toward the mountains before this, it is simply because right here is his first and only chance to leave the trail and be absolutely sure that no tracks will give away his change of direction."

The marshal seemed struck by the woman's logic. He studied the situation for a moment, when he replied:

"There's something in what you say, missus. Still, the man must be aware that he is taking a great risk in case his scheme should fall flat—if we should get onto his trick of slinking away into the mountains. With us following in his tracks, you see, and with all those glaciers, which he cannot cross, before him, he'd be caught in a trap of his own setting. He must have figured with that too."

"He sure would," the woman agreed readily, "if he knew that we had a dog on his track. But, knowing nothing of this, he feels quite safe."

The woman's argument had converted at least two of the men to her opinion. These two declared themselves willing to follow the lead of the dog. Their proposal decided the marshal also.

"Why not let's split up, if we can't agree on this question?" he offered. "I myself can't understand yet why Bigfoot should have turned into the mountains; but I'm willing to follow the dog for some distance, and sooner or later we're bound to find out whether he's been following the fugitive or not."

As a result of the marshal's proposal, the Grizzly Kid and two men of the party shouldered their packs and set out across the moraine in the same direction they had been following all morning; while the marshal, with the remaining half of the party, turned at right angles to follow the dog, who led them along the center of the barren rock wall toward the glistening snow fields above them.

For more than a mile the pursuers advanced along the top of the moraine, their eyes critically scanning the rocks under their feet—without, however, discovering the slightest sign of a scratch or abrasion on the barren surface that would have indicated the passing of some creature over the rocks.

In time the snaking trail of the moraine led them in among the foothills, where, instead of rising like an embankment above the surrounding ground, it occupied the center of a broad gorge, cut by the glacier through the hills. Between the brush-grown slopes of this glacier-built cañon the party moved steadily upward for another mile, when, suddenly, the dog swerved from the center of the moraine and sniffed his way along the boulders to the rim of the pile, where he descended to the bottom of the cañon.

Down there a small rivulet entered the gorge through a cut in the cañon wall and disappeared among the loose rocks at the foot of the moraine. The dog made straight for the cool, clear water, and was lapping it eagerly by the time that the marshal arrived at the bottom. An exclamation of startled surprise from Black Tom caused the other members of the party to hurry to his side. They found him pointing silently to the impressions of two huge

boots that showed in the fine, moist sand at the rim of the water.

"Bigfoot's been takin' a drink here," one of the men observed sagely.

His statement of a self-evident fact elicited no reply from the rest of the party, but there was an eager light in the marshal's eyes as he turned to the woman.

"I haven't got the slightest idea what could possibly have led the fugitive in this direction," he confided to her, "and I believe that when we do find out the truth it'll come as a surprise to us. In the meantime, we can't do better than follow that wonderful dog of yours. You may be sure that you won't hear any more doubts expressed concerning his ability as a man hunter."

All through the late afternoon the little party followed in the wake of the tireless dog. It led them steadily uphill through tall grass, broken by thickets of alder and mountain ash, while every little dell and gully contained its grove of dwarfish spruce. These groves grew more dingy and also more rare as the elevation increased. The luxuriant pea-vine grass had long since disappeared, and its place was taken by yellowish tufts of bunched grass, while the steeper slopes still showed green under a lush carpet of tiny cranberry plants.

Daylight was dwindling by the time that they reached the last grove of shrublike spruce in a little, sheltered valley. Above them the slope steepened in a mile-wide belt of short moss and patches of barren rock. Beyond that a perpetual blanket of snow covered the mountain to its truncated top.

The members of the posse decided to make camp in the little grove. However, before they entered the clump of tiny trees, Mrs. Hollister took another look up the slope, where the purple shadows already descended upon the bleak fields of snow.

"Oh, look!" she called out suddenly and pointed with evident excitement toward the crest of the mountain, where, through the slowly gathering gloom, a dark, moving point had just emerged from a ravine and progressed slowly across the purplish background of the snow.

The marshal quickly turned his binoculars upon the object, and in a moment exclaimed:

"It's a man—Bigfoot, of course. Look, he's heading for that pass in the mountain crest—there—he stops and looks back—no need to hide, missus, he can't see us as we can see him—now he enters the pass—he's gone—I wonder——"

The marshal did not say what he wondered at, but advised his followers to take what rest they could during the few hours of night, as he intended to continue the chase with the coming of daylight. They needed no urging, but were soon ensconced in their sleeping bags; and all was quiet in camp.

However, the long march that had exhausted his followers seemed to have left little effect on the robust frame of Black Tom. All through the few hours of half-hearted darkness he lay awake in his lynx robe, his eyes roving over the stark profile of the mountain as it stood sharply silhouetted against the gloomy sky. As soon as daylight permitted, he rolled out of his robe and set out to gather whatever dry wood the little copse had to offer. With it he started a smokeless fire and suspended the tin coffeepot, which they had brought along with them, above the flames. When the pleasant aroma of the boiling coffee began to pervade the camp he roused his companions. They made a hearty breakfast of the provisions which they carried, and were ready for the trail by the time that the early sun began to paint the snow fields which they were soon to cross.

The dog, being no longer needed, seemed quite content to relinquish the

honor of leading the party to the eagerly advancing marshal. In short time, they crossed the distance to the rim of the snowcap where the fugitive's tracks were very apparent. Here the pursuing party sank into the soft, slushy mass up to their knees—an experience which their quarry seemed to have undergone in an even greater measure the evening before. Higher up, where the snow had attained a certain depth, it was quite firm, and the going from then on became excellent, though the mountain slope rose much steeper toward the crest.

Black Tom seemed devoured with eager impatience this morning. And he was considerably in advance of his party when he reached the gap in the mountain crest where he had watched the figure of the man disappear the night before. Close at hand, it proved to be a broad and deep cañon partly filled with wind-drifted and packed snow, out of which rose the tops of a number of black, volcanic boulders. The marshal advanced to the end of the cañon where he came to an abrupt stop behind a large piece of black lava rock. He stood there quietly for some time, with only his head protruding beyond the edge of the rock, until he heard the approach of his companions from the entrance of the cañon. When he turned to face them, his features carried the unmistakable imprint of amazement and surprise.

"Try and keep hid behind those rocks," he cautioned them in an undertone while he pointed beyond the rim of the cañon. "I believe that Bigfoot is somewhere in the valley down there."

Thus warned, the three members of his party advanced carefully to his side behind a large boulder. Exclamations of astonishment escaped them at the sight that met their eyes. Before them, and some five hundred feet below the level of their position, spread a fragment of beautiful country, rimmed in by a frowning wall of steep, snow-crowned cliffs. A valley, nearly circular in shape and some two miles in diameter, formed the bottom of what was unmistakably the crater of a caved-in volcano. The rich lava soil of the floor of the crater had brought forth a spontaneous growth of vegetation that for luxuriance could scarcely be equaled in temperate climes.

Even from where they stood, the amazed beholders were aware of the gigantic size of the spruce trees, some of which must have measured several feet in diameter. Intermingled with the somber green of the conifers shone bright patches of birch tops, while a number of tiny lakes lay encircled by fringes of gigantic, broad-crowned cottonwood trees.

That this remarkable effort of nature was due not only to the richness of the soil and the sheltered position of the place was indicated by a number of cloudlike wisps of vapor that hovered over some of the little lakes and also rose in various places from among the dense timber of the valley bottom.

"Hot springs," the marshal commented in an undertone. "This seems to be what scientists would call a dormant volcano. According to the number of columns of fog you see rising there must be enough of those hot springs down there to keep the entire floor of the valley at a temperature so that it'll stay free of frost and snow all winter. I have met many such places in the North, but this is the finest of its kind that I have come across."

"What would you call that now?" Mrs. Hollister asked the marshal, while she pointed in the direction to the left of them, where the dissipating vapors gradually uncovered a long, narrow and darkly glittering surface that stretched

from the near to the farther rim of the valley and cut the forested floor of the crater into two uneven halves.

"It lies smooth as water and looks altogether like a long, narrow lake," the woman added, "but there is a certain gloss and luster to that surface so that I'd swear it is anything but water."

The marshal produced his glasses and, for some time, held them trained upon the area indicated by the woman.

"Volcanic mud I should call it," the marshal substantiated the woman's surmise. "But the peculiar black luster on its surface is produced by some tarlike substance that is mixed with the mud," he added. "The broad, barren shores of this lake, as you call it, are likewise a sign that it contains matter which doesn't favor the growth of vegetation. That sort of stuff is frequently brought to the surface by volcanic action, and, if allowed to cool, it'll become hard and dry so that you can walk over it."

"I have my doubts that this lake has had a chance to cool," the woman surmised.

"No——" the marshal was about to reply, when, suddenly, he stopped open-mouthed to stare fixedly down in the direction of the right-hand rim of the enormous caldron where, at the distance of half a mile, a thin column of gray smoke spiraled up the dark face of the cliffs that surrounded the valley. What before had lain concealed amidst the scenic diversity of the whole, was now brought into bright relief by the tiny wreath of smoke that pointed like an index finger to its source—a stove pipe rising above the roof of a small log cabin, that squatted inconspicuously upon a grass-grown terrace in the shadow of the dark crater wall.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" Black Tom reverted to his favorite expression when surprised. "This explains why we have so often lost all track of Bigfoot for months at a time ever since we first began to hunt for him five years ago. This is his home, the place where he hid and rested in perfect comfort and security between his murderous expeditions."

Just then the door of the shack opened and the figure of a large, bulky man stepped into the broad, open space before the cabin.

"It's Bigfoot, all right," the marshal announced after a brief look through his glasses. "He carries a rifle or shotgun in his hand, and, no doubt, he's out to get something for his breakfast."

"According to that, he must feel quite safe in his retreat," the woman remarked.

"Well, he won't enjoy his retreat much longer," one of the men declared determinedly as he examined the magazine of his rifle. "He killed my partner an' I've nursed a hankerin' ever since ter see daylight shine through his body. Come on, boys, let's get after him!"

"No, you won't!" The marshal laid a restraining hand on the man's shoulder. "Don't you see that we can't get down this steep slope without being in open view to him all the time that we're climbing down? What do you think would come of it if he happened to glance this way and saw us? He'd either get clean away from us, or, otherwise, there'd be a fight—and that's something that we're trying to avoid as long as it ain't necessary."

"Well, what you goin' ter do then?" the man asked sullenly.

"Wait till dark and surprise him in his cabin while he's asleep. That's the surest and safest way to catch him, even if it does demand a little patience on our part. But, then, we all ain't had any too much sleep last night, and so I propose that some of us take a little rest now, while one man stays behind this rock and sort of keeps an eye on Bigfoot."

The marshal's proposition was unanimously accepted, though none of the

party felt any desire for spreading his fur robes upon the packed snow. The sight of their quarry seemed to hold too great a fascination for any of them to be willing to miss any of his movements.

Meanwhile, the distant figure had been slowly walking along the grass-grown, terracelike embankment at the foot of the crater wall. Suddenly the interested spectators saw him swing the gun to his shoulder; two small, white puffs of smoke issued in quick succession; and three seconds later the almost continuous roar of the two shots reached the ears of the posse. While the echoes thundered and reverberated across the cliff-inclosed valley, the man stepped some distance ahead and, bending to the ground two times, picked up the game he had shot.

A moment later a large flock of somber-colored game birds, whose peculiar manner of flying marked them as ptarmigans, whirred across the valley in front of the party.

The watchers at the rim of the crater saw Bigfoot returning to his cabin where he dropped the birds to the ground, and sat down on a block of wood with his back to the unseen spectators, after which he was evidently engaged in picking the birds he had shot.

Suddenly the marshal startled his companions with the question:

"Where is your dog, Mrs. Hollister?"

The question caused a sudden flush of apprehension in the woman. Anxiously she gaze about her, and presently a low cry of alarm escaped her lips.

"There," she exclaimed, pointing down the slope to the left of them, where the dog's tracks showed plainly upon a patch of snow beside those of the fugitive, "I should have known that Blacky can't listen to any shooting without having to run after the sound. That's the one fault I could never rid him of."

"You mean to say that, while we were watching Bigfoot, the dog sneaked away to follow his tracks?" Black Tom asked with a note of dismay in his voice.

"I am afraid that he couldn't resist the sound of the shots," the woman admitted.

The marshal made no further reply to this news that promised to spoil his carefully laid plans. He raised the glasses and trained them upon the open space in front of the cabin. Three pairs of unaided eyes strained in the same direction.

They had not long to wait when they saw the black shape of the retriever issuing from the woods and trotting up the grass-grown slope toward the cabin. When the dog caught sight of the man, who was sitting with his back turned toward him, he came to a momentary halt. Presently he advanced again, much slower now, for these were strange surroundings, and he seemed uncertain what reception his appearance would receive from the man.

The original purpose for which he had deserted the party seemed long ago forgotten, and his only ambition now appeared to be to scrape an acquaintance with the man sitting on the log. Twice more he momentarily halted his timid advance and raised his nose as if to probe the surrounding atmosphere for radiations promising a friendly reception. Finally, when only two steps behind the unsuspecting man, the dog came to a complete stop and for some time stood energetically wagging his large, curved tail.

To the watchers on the cliff the dog's behavior presented a situation that increased in tenseness as the distance shortened between the dog and the man. Black Tom's reaction to the slowly developing crisis was shown by a deadly pallor in the regions of his face not

covered by his great, black beard. His two male companions manifested their excitement in a more marked manner; one of them kept continually changing his weight from one foot to the other, while his partner pounded the rock before him with his fist, accompanying the hammering with a litany of murmured curses. In Mrs. Hollister the strain of the ticklish situation found expression in a succession of suppressed moans. At last the spell was broken when the dog ventured the final step and rubbed his nose against the unsuspecting man's thigh.

As if stung by an adder, the killer leaped to his feet. A half-picked bird dropped from his hand, while his eyes traveled swiftly from the dog before him to the pass in the crater's rim. At a glance, he seemed to have grasped the situation. In an instant he delivered a kick to the dog that sent the animal howling back; in another, he rushed toward his cabin.

For not more than two minutes Bigfoot remained in the cabin while his pursuers stood silent and inactive. Presently he emerged with a pack strapped to his shoulders, carrying a rifle in his right hand, while under his left arm he bore an object whose nature seemed indeterminable even by the aid of the marshal's powerful glasses.

"Looks like two boards shaped like a pair of short and broad snowshoes," the latter surmised as he handed his binoculars to Mrs. Hollister.

"It doesn't matter if he sees us now," he told the woman, "we have to go after him and try to catch or kill him the best way we can. But you, Mrs. Hollister, I want to stay right here—on top of this rock would be the best place, so we can see you clearly from below against the snow behind you. If Bigfoot comes out in the open at any place you're bound to see him. In that case, I want you to wave your arm in his direction."

The marshal spoke the last of these words, while he was already on his way hurrying down the steep slope after the other men. Shortly the three of them entered the dense woods at the bottom of the valley and were lost to the woman's sight. The direction which they took offered the promise that they might intercept the fugitive, whose immediate goal lay evidently in a low pass in the crater's rim directly across the valley from his cabin.

For some time the woman watched, bringing her glasses to bear alternately upon each of the many open spaces that the valley afforded. The broad, barren shore that girded the lake of mud drew her especial attention; and there, presently, she saw the figure of a man cautiously step from cover. It was Bigfoot Bixbee.

Having glanced up and down the shore the man laid his rifle and the two boards he carried on the ground beside him. He stooped down and, for a short time, was occupied in a manner which the watcher on the hill could not define until he rose and stepped to the rim of the lake.

The purpose of the two boards, which he had brought with him, became apparent as soon as Bigfoot stepped out upon the surface of the lake of mud. The boards were attached to his feet, and he used them in the manner of snowshoes as he advanced upon the darkly glittering surface. Even at the distance where the woman watched with breathless interest the killer's progress, she was able to appreciate the treacherous nature of the ground that supported him.

With each cautious step, as he moved forward, the footing under him bent with the springy elasticity of new ice. It was as if the man were moving over the surface of an enormous black, gelatinous pudding. It was evident to the lonely sentinel on the cliff that only

while he kept going would the treacherous surface support his weight. To stop for more than a second would be fatal. And that Bigfoot was aware of his risk was indicated by the fact that, from the moment he entered upon the pulpy crust of the lake, he seemed lost to all sense of the danger that threatened him from possible pursuers. He glanced neither to the right nor to the left, but moved forward with long, shuffling strides—more in the manner of a man walking on skis than a snowshoe musher.

His object in crossing the dangerous lake was apparent to the woman on the cliff, as was also the enormous advantage that the killer would have gained on his pursuers once he reached the opposite shore. Between the opposite lake shore and the rim of the crater lay a stretch of forest half a mile in width, while the crater wall itself was so low at the point for which the man was headed as to afford an easy exit from the floor of the volcano. It was clear that, if the marshal and his men did not stop the fugitive's progress with a bullet before he could reach the protection afforded by the screen of timber on the opposite shore, Bigfoot had an excellent chance to make good his escape. The marshal and his party could not cross the perilous surface of the lake in the manner of the fugitive, but would be forced to make a long detour around its shore. By the time they could reach the pass in the crater's rim, Bigfoot would have gained comparative safety in the country below the timber line.

Though the woman was clearly aware of the murderer's excellent chances of escape, she failed to deplore that fact in the intense interest with which she watched his perilous progress. Already he had covered three-quarters of the distance to the opposite shore—and a short fifty yards would see him out of danger—when, suddenly, something seemed to have gone amiss. No longer did he swing forward his feet in the far, gliding strides he had used before. His steps became short and hesitating. And once he actually came to a halt and stooped over as if to adjust something about his peculiar footwear that seemed to be out of order. Quickly, however, as his perilous support bent under him in an alarming manner, he rose and shuffled on again, without, apparently, having accomplished the purpose that he had in mind when he bent down.

The hesitancy in his progress now became more marked with every step. He had not proceeded more than ten yards when once more he bent down with a quick movement of his body. For scarce the space of two seconds he remained stooped over, when the rapidly increasing danger made him rise again. This time he seemed to have succeeded in adjusting whatever trouble had interfered with his progress, for he reached out unhesitatingly with large strides.

However, to the woman, who watched the fugitive's movements through her glasses, it became momentarily apparent that the resumption of his former, unhesitating gait was but a gesture of despair. For, suddenly, she beheld with horror the wooden board upon his right foot slipping its fastenings and sliding forward along the dark, glassy surface, where it came to rest some ten steps in advance of the man.

With a movement that gave evidence of extreme panic the man flung away his rifle and pack and tried to shuffle along, upon the support of the one remaining board, to the shore which was now only about twenty yards distant. The experiment of a few seconds seemed to convince him of the futility of the attempt, for he kicked the board from his left foot and prostrated himself at full length upon the treacherous

surface. Like a great, crawling toad, he reached out with his arms and legs and tried to wriggle forward on his stomach.

But not for long—for, gradually, the pulpy crust of the lake dented under the man's weight. A circular hollow formed around the desperately squirming figure. Presently the crust broke, and the convulsively floundering legs of the killer showed glistening with a dark, bituminous coating. Then the legs disappeared through the break. The desperately writhing body became more and more deeply engulfed in the black pulp. By the time the pasty mass reached to his chin a shrill cry of mortal agony escaped the man's lips, and was muffled only when the slimy paste entered his mouth. For a moment longer—while the echoes of his death cry reverberated from the crater walls—two tar-smeared hands gesticulated above the surface as if in a last, despairing farewell. Then they, too, disappeared; the break closed, the dent rose. And, a minute later, the level plain of the lake surface glittered once more serene and unbroken, save for the lone presence of the two boards, which had remained above the surface as silent reminders of the ghastly tragedy.

When the pale and trembling woman turned her eyes from the scene of the fearful spectacle, they encountered the silent figures of her three companions, gazing motionless from the shore of the lake toward the two boards left upon the peaceful surface of the lake.

Sickened by the spectacle of the murderer's awful fate, Mrs. Hollister remained seated upon the rock in exhaustion. When, at last, she rose and looked down into the bottom of the caldron she beheld her companions approaching Bigfoot's cabin. Carefully she descended the steep slope to join them. And by the time she reached the clearing in front of the cabin, she saw the marshal engaged in a curious performance. He had discarded his leather boots and, with only his heavy, woolen socks as foot covering, had strapped to his feet a pair of boards similar to those which Bigfoot had used in his attempt to cross the lake. Thus accoutered, the marshal was striding about the clearing, while his two companions sat in front of the cabin watching him interestedly.

When the marshal saw the woman approaching, he strode toward her. Black Tom surmised the fact of her late experience.

"You have seen it?" he asked briefly.

The woman nodded in silence.

"He had another pair of these—well—call them 'mudshoes,' in his cabin," the man explained, pointing to the snowshoe-shaped boards under his feet. "I am just experimenting with them to find out the reason that could have caused the fatal breakdown."

"You see," the marshal went on to explain, "he has evidently crossed that mud lake many times on the boardshoes; but we all know that he never used any other footwear before this but his moccasins. Now, you know, missus, you cannot wear either snowshoes or skis with a pair of stiff-soled and heeled boots; and with these boards here the case is even worse. You notice the rawhide fastenings attached just ahead of the center of these boards. Well, they are fitted expressly for the moccasins which Bigfoot always wore. I have tried to walk on these boards with my boots on, but I could not get ahead more than a few steps when those fastenings would slip and loosen on the smooth, stiff leather of the boots. So it seems," the marshal concluded, "that the accident with his mudshoes was due entirely to the killer's wearing your husband's stiff-soled boots instead of his usual footwear."

"Dead man's boots!" the woman muttered thoughtfully.

It took the party the rest of the day to take stock of the contents of the cabin and, principally, of the cave which penetrated into the cliff immediately behind the cabin. This dry and airy cave contained a large assortment of supplies and provisions of a sort that would have permitted Bixbee to live in his retreat for months and, perhaps, years, without being compelled to return to civilization.

The cave contained long rows of shelves that were stacked with canned goods like a well-furnished grocery store. A large rack contained more than a dozen rifles, shotguns and short arms with plenty of ammunition for each of them. Attached to the ceiling by copper wires dangled some of the most valuable furs the country afforded, while a niche in the back part of the cave gave up a moosehide poke, filled with gold dust and coarse nuggets.

"God alone knows how many lonely prospectors and trappers he's done away with to accumulate all this stuff," the marshal remarked. "I'll have to take an inventory of all that's here and send a party with pack mules up here to get it—except the gold and some of the best of the fur. We can carry that along when we leave here."

Later the marshal returned to the cabin, where Mrs. Hollister was occupied in preparing a meal for the party.

"I have just been talking to the boys," he announced as he dropped into a chair, "and we're all of the opinion that, if it weren't for your dog and the way that you believed in his ability to follow the murderer's track and thereby forced us against our own judgment to come to this place, we'd never have thought of looking for the killer up here in the mountains. So we came to the conclusion that the reward offered for the death of the killer must all go to you——"

"But, marshal," the woman broke in, "what about yourself and the men with you? You don't suppose that I could have captured him single-handed, or have driven him into the arms of the fate that overtook him if you had not been with me?"

Black Tom made a disparaging gesture.

"None of us men really had anything to do with Bigfoot's death," he said, "and it is a question whether he saw any of us to-day. The sight of the dog convinced him that a posse was on his heels and drove him to his hasty flight, without taking time to exchange his heavy boots for the moccasins which he needed to cross the lake in safety. No, that's settled! We feel that none of us men has deserved a cent of the reward and won't accept any of it. The thousand dollars will all go to you."

Mrs. Hollister had no further objection to offer, but seemed busy with her cooking utensils. The marshal sat stroking the silky, black hair of the dog, who had approached him in his usual, friendly manner and was sitting with his head upon the man's knees.

"There's another thing that I'd like to talk over with you," the marshal began again. "I should like to buy your dog."

The woman turned in surprise: "You want to buy Blacky?"

"Yes, and I'm willing to pay as good a price for him as for the best lead dog in the country. Would you let me have him for five hundred dollars? You see," he went on to explain without waiting for an answer, "the experiences of this trip have convinced me that a good man-hunting dog is just about indispensable here. Now, of all the dogs that I have seen in this country, yours is the only one that'll fill my requirements. He can stand the rigor of the climate and, at the same time, he's able to follow a scent as well as any bloodhound. He's the very dog for me."

The woman quietly shoved a boiling pot to the back of the stove before she turned with an amused smile upon her face.

"I'm afraid, marshal, that if I sold you Blacky for five hundred dollars you'd be back after the first attempt to set him on a scent and arrest me for fraud. Blacky is not a man-hunting dog."

"Not a man-hunting dog?" the marshal repeated uncomprehendingly. "What do you call his splendid performance of yesterday then?"

"That?" the woman smiled, "that was nothing more than the evidence that he is what he looks—a first-class retriever. You know, there are just two things that you can expect of a retriever: to find and carry back to you the game that you shot, or, otherwise, follow the trail of any game that you wounded, and follow it until the game is found, or until there isn't a trace of its scent left. Blacky, here, is particularly good on following the game scent."

"Yes, but it wasn't game he was following——" the marshal attempted to put in.

"I'm coming to that," the woman went on to explain. "You see, during the summertime, when there is no travel and no trade at my place, I do a good deal of hunting for small game. I often go many miles from my home. I may shoot a ptarmigan here, a grouse there, and, by the time that I'm ready to return, I may have killed as many as a dozen birds. Now, instead of carrying the increasingly heavy load with me all day, I hang each bird to the limb of a tree at the place where I have bagged it, but not before I have rewarded the dog with part of the cleanings, of which he is inordinately fond. Also, I take a little of the fat of the bird and smear it on my boots. When I think that it's about time to make for home, all I have to do is set the dog on my back trail, where he eagerly follows the scent of the grouse and leads me unerringly to each tree where I have hung up a bird. I have done this dozens of times and have never lost a single one, thanks to Blacky here.

"I have told you that Bigfoot made me grease my husband's boots for him. The moment that he suggested it I felt like murdering him, but soon an idea entered my head. In this berry season the birds are very fat, and I cleaned nearly a cupful of grease from the four grouse I prepared for him. I used all of that grease for his boots, and I knew that, if the chance offered to set my dog on the killer's track, Blacky would follow that bird scent as long as there was any grease left on the boots. That's why you saw me so confident; and events have proved that I can trust my dog as a game trailer. But," she laughed as she turned once more to her cooking, "unless you can arrange to have the boots of any of your future fugitives greased with grouse fat you'll find Blacky but a poor man hunter, and certainly not worth the big price which you offered."

The marshal joined good-naturedly in the woman's laughter.

"Well, no," he admitted, "not the way you explain things. But, it seems, Blacky is still waiting for his reward."

With that he led the capering dog outside and treated him to the fattest of the two birds that the killer had abandoned in his fatal attempt at escape.

Bucking with Bar C

By George Gilbert

Author of "Without Quarter," etc.

Synopsis of Preceding Chapters

A YOUNG cowboy, "Cricket" Bursand, owner of the Bar C Ranch, plans to drive a trail herd to the shipping pens to defeat the plans of the railroad company, which is charging too high a rate. Bullis, agent of the company, becomes Cricket's bitter enemy.

Judith Patterson, with whom Cricket is in love, puts her cattle into Cricket's trail herd, and she and a friend of hers, Miss Marvel Osgood, go as "hands" with Cricket and his men on the trail.

Cronk, a rancher, sells all his beeves to Cricket. The latter has no ready money, but secures a loan from Banker Hamilton, and signs a note promising to pay Cronk, his heirs or assigns. The Cronk cattle are thrown in with the Bar C trail herd.

Really, Bullis was behind Hamilton's move. If Cricket doesn't get the cattle through, he won't be able to meet his note. Bullis plans to buy the note from Cronk, and thus get Cricket in his power.

Bullis hires Dernold, "Arizona" Shallum, and others. They secure a calf, infested with ticks, and put it in way of the trail herd, but Cricket discovers it in time. The three—Bullis, Dernold, and Shallum are arrested, but a crooked deputy, Tom Cussettier, lets them escape. They plan further deviltry against the Bar C herd.

Meantime, the Poco Kid, who is rather fond of Marvel Osgood, Andy Tice, "Teaser" Rines, Casey Jones, and Jeed, Cricket's men, proceed with the herd.

CHAPTER XVII.

"WHERE'S TH' REMUDA?"

DRIFTING now about northeast, skirting the granger section as well as they could and still make their northing, the Bar C crowd kept with the cattle. No other incidents had happened to disturb their peace, since leaving Hurleyton. They had been observed at a distance, by groups of grangers who had ridden out to make sure that the herded cattle did not go through planted lands. But the cattle were kept to the hills, where there was plenty of room, and were allowed to come down to the lower levels only as likely short-cuts were discovered.

Several times the ranchers were headed off and had to answer questions put by deputations of grangers, who plainly showed that they had been incited by some one else to interfere. To all of them, Cricket Bursand told the

plain story of how he was trying to fight for fair rail rates and was doing it by marching his cattle afoot.

"I'm just marketin' my crop on the hoof," he smiled his way through their opposition. "Say, who's putting up all these arguments that you're usin' against us?"

The granger leaders had to admit that mysterious strangers had appeared in each community, spreading stories of how a group of tough men were on a trail drive, cutting fences, shooting up hamlets and committing all sorts of depredation.

"Just get into touch with Hurleyton, and ask the cowmen back there what happened," Cricket advised them.

The opposition in the granger belt gradually melted away. The ranchers were held up several times, though, at points where they had to beg the use of private lanes, and once they had to pay a man who had a big pond on his place and demanded a nickel a dozen head for letting the cattle drink. Cricket paid this in order to create a favorable impression.

Swinging to the west again, as they had to do in order to avoid a thickly settled region, sprinkled with towns, Cricket took the lead of the herd and piloted it into the sand hill section, often riding ahead of it for half a day, to scout out the lay of the land.

Now they were at the border of a region famed in earlier days as the retreat of rustlers and horse thieves—a place to which train robbers and bank blowers came when pursuit was too hot back in the settlements.

Coming back from his first scout into that lonely stretch, Cricket rode into camp on a knoll overlooking the first part of the sand hill country. The two wagons were drawn up side by side. At the tail of the cook wagon, the fire had been made. And Judith was stepping about quietly efficient.

"You're sure late, cowboy," she greeted him, "but I've kept the coffee pot on the embers and saved you some beans and bacon."

The others of the party were away from the fire for the moment on various bits of work of their own.

"Judith, why don't you talk a little mite different to me, when we're alone?" Cricket started to plead.

"Remember that this trip is strictly business," she quickly reminded him.

"I ain't gettin' a chance to forget that, am I?" he asked.

Cricket thought that he heard a suppressed laugh. He got up and started around the fire toward her, but she said:

"Cricket, don't be ridiculous. Isn't that some of the boys coming back to the fire?"

Cricket sat down heavily and began to eat again. Casey Jones, Old Jeed, Andy Tice and Teaser Rines were together; The Poco Kid was out with the remuda. The others were with the bedded herd on a knoll about a quarter of a mile away. Now the night had fully come.

"What did you find, Cricket?" Jeed asked, as they all sat down around him.

"Sand," was Cricket's response.

"Well, we don't need any of that, I guess," Casey Jones retorted.

"Ribbon-cane, too; I saw some in some draws. How did that get into that dry stretch?" Cricket asked, just as Marvel Osgood came into the circle and sat down.

"Some homesteaders tried it out along the edges of these sand hills twenty years ago," Jeed informed them. "They grew ribbon-cane, maize and sorghum. They had a few good years, then the dry winds got them, and they quit. The seeds have stayed in the soil, and that ribbon-cane has sown itself. I've heard that when the rains come, that ribbon-cane grows right out among the sand hills in little patches. See any grass?"

"Yes, in scattered spots, but I think that it will feed the cattle till we get

out above Hanseburg, and we can pasture then in some places that I heard about when I scouted the route out early this spring. We'll keep those beeves on good pasture about ten days before delivery and put the finishin' touches on them that way," Cricket remarked.

"How about water out in those sand hills?" Andy Tice asked.

"I found two small ponds that will do for a starter. There were a lot of pond-holes full when I was here in the spring. Most of them, as far as I went to-day, are dried up. But there's some water in two of them, although it's pretty brackish and scummy," was the reply.

"Suppose it's all dry beyond where you scouted to-day?" Teaser Rines asked. "What'll we do then?"

"Keep on goin'; the old-timers drove sixty miles sometimes without water. The cattle went blind and crazy, but they brought them through," Cricket replied.

They broke camp with the dawn. The cattle started willingly, for, by now, they had developed that blind obedience to the will of their drovers that marks the trail-broken herd that has not been spoiled by frequent stampedes or other mishaps of the Long Trails.

Ahead stretched the sand hills, some almost white, others a gray-brown. The heat waves shimmered and danced early out there. The party struck a draw out of which the cowboys had to haul the wagons with lass ropes run from saddle horns to wagon tongue to assist the straining bronchos hitched to the wagons. In the draw was the high-standing ribbon-cane, succulent now; if dry, a tinder-bed in which fire would run to twice the height of man and with the speed of the wild goose in flight. The alert eyes of The Poco Kid caught the stirring of the long cane far below in the draw after he had driven the remuda in and then out of the draw. He rode down, to face a snorting, charging bull, red of hair, wide of horn. No brand was on him, The Kid noted, as his agile cow pony dodged the charging terror, and The Kid's gun smoked him down.

Cricket came spurring back to inquire. The Kid spoke:

"Wild bull; old broad horn; maverick, too; been hiding out in these draws and enjoyin' himself. I shot him to keep him from gettin' in with our stuff. Thought that he might have ticks."

"No brand?" Cricket inquired.

"No, not any," was the reply.

"Glad you got him. We've been lucky so far in keeping strays out of our herd, Poco. We had to haze some pretty hard back in that granger strip to keep them from joinin' our marchers, but we kept them out and the herd's ready for inspection at any time," Cricket remarked.

They joined the outfit. The Poco Kid got behind the remuda again and sent it off to one side, where he could keep it on a route parallel to that taken by the cattle, yet out of the dust that now became somewhat bothersome. The girls, with the wagons, angled off to the other side and the small drag, followed by the riders told off for that purpose, was easily kept on the move. The sand was light and the going good, so that day they made a good march into the lonely land—seeing no man, no strange cattle, no game, no horses.

"How far did we come to-day?" Casey Jones asked Cricket. They were camped for the night on the warm sand, at the edge of one of the pond-holes. The cattle had sniffed at the brackish water gingerly. They had drunk, however, using up a good share of the fluid. They had driven the cattle to the pond-hole in bunches of a hundred, holding the others back, till all had drunk. The water barrels on the wagon still held good drinking water from the outside.

"I think that we made about thirty miles. It's about one hundred and fifty

to where we can swing around above Hanseburg, and all of it will be through this kind of country, except some thirty miles at the fag-end, above Hanseburg."

"How far in here did you ride the other day?" Jeed asked.

"I think sixty miles before I turned back. I was in the saddle all that day, and it was after dusk when I made camp again," Cricket replied.

"See any humans?" he was asked.

"Not a one; glad of it, too," Cricket answered.

"So am I. The people we'd meet up with in here would be mostly on the scout. I'm warnin' all of you not to take any chances on people that we come across in these sand hills," Casey Jones said earnestly. "They say that the Tawlton gang was all shot up after that bank robbery, but I know better. They got the leader, but some of the low-down sneaks of that crowd got away and I've heard they hang out in these sand hills yet."

"Well, we'll meet them with a smile and a gun; they can take their choice," Cricket answered. "This region isn't considered very tame, and no questions are asked by the law if a scrap takes place out here. They told me that when I came up scoutin' the route in the spring."

"This would be a good place to meet up with Bullis and his gunmen?" Teaser Rines hinted.

"If they didn't get started first, son," Jeed reminded him.

"I guess that we can care for all that they can send us," Cricket said. "I'm goin' to ride over to where that Poco Kid is with the remuda. He may get lonesome at that other waterin' place."

"We'd better put another man with that bunch of hosses. We've got along pretty well with one man herding them so far, but we ought to have a day and night herd from now on," Jeed remarked.

"I've been thinkin' of that, Jeed. The cattle don't take so much care now; they're pretty well trail-broke. I hardly think that a herd would be stolen in these times, but hosses could be run off with and driven a couple of hundred miles in two days and taken some place where they'd be hard to find. Then they could be rebranded, and scattered, and sold in some of those wild sections to the west of us, where no questions would be asked if a hoss was sold cheap and was good, as all our string are," Cricket answered him.

He saddled his night horse and rode away through the dark toward the other pond-hole, carrying a snack for Poco Kid to eat during the night, if he wanted it. The other pond-hole was about three miles from the camp, and The Poco Kid had said that he would hold the horses there during the night, as there was grass close to the pond-hole. Cricket saw the moving, shifting blot on the light-colored sand floor of the pond-hole locality and knew it to be the horse-herd. The snorting made it certain, and he heard The Poco Kid's challenge:

"Come in and make yourself known."

There was a certain hard quality in the challenge that at once caught the keen ear of Cricket:

"Anything wrong, Kid?" he asked.

"I don't think so, but I don't want to take chances," was the reply.

"What do you mean?" Cricket asked.

"Some of the bronchos are actin' a bit queer. We hadn't ought to've kept the beeves and the hosses so far apart. You ain't got any extra hosses handy at camp if there came a run," Poco Kid replied.

"No, but this once, it won't do any harm," Cricket said optimistically. "I didn't want the hosses around that other pond-hole. A hoss is apt to want a drink any hour of the night and get it. A cow stays put, and don't want anything extra after the bed-ground's filled, generally. Those hosses would hardly

have drunk out of that other pond-hole after the cattle had roiled it all up."

They sat down on the warm sand together, chatting while the big stars twinkled and the far wail of the coyotes came to them.

"Want a relief to-night?" Cricket asked.

"I guess not. I've got my own best hoss staked out, ready."

"How're the hosses actin'?" Cricket inquired.

"Except that they're a little restless, they're all right. I suppose that they're restless on account of being new on this sandy stretch," said Poco Kid.

"That may be it. I'd hate to be set afoot out here. It would be worse than havin' it happen back in the settlements," Cricket remarked.

He finally left, after promising to ride out again early in the morning. Poco Kid bade him a terse good night, the better to cover a bit of uneasiness that he was ashamed to show, for fear that the older men would ridicule him for giving it expression.

Cricket turned after he had ridden away. He could see the shifting, changing blur that was the herd of equines, could hear the faint snorts and pawing of some of the more restless animals. He half turned to go back, then rode away, humming a bit of a love song.

"If you feel that way about it why don't you marry the girl?" The Poco Kid called after him.

"You know where you can go," Cricket left behind him, wakening from his reverie with a jerk and starting his horse into sharp action.

Back in camp again, Cricket tried to put off a feeling of uneasiness. He watched the ears of the horses on picket, as the leaping firelight revealed them from time to time. He listened for sounds of trouble at the herd, but none came to him. The guards changed; the stars swam in wheeling course; the night wind caused the sand to whisper, as it slipped and slid on the crests of the hills and, from afar, came the mourn of a great gray wolf, calling to his pack.

Once, as the guard changed, Cricket thought that he heard something off in the outlands, but even then he put aside the thought of trouble with that evil perversity that, at times, clouds the judgment of the wariest of humans.

Then came deep sleep, broken by the coming of dawn. Cricket leaped afoot, all his terrors put aside as he looked about and saw the quiet horses on picket, the last night guard coming in, and heard the report that the herd had left the bed-ground and grazed off quietly, without a sign of trouble.

"About time for The Poco Kid to come in, so that we can rope out our morning hosses. Stretch a rope to corral them," Cricket said.

The rope, stretched between the chuck and bed-roll wagons, was made ready, another angle of it staked off to a low shrub. The horses, running up to it, would stop—the old fear of rope-burn holding them better than a copper-riveted bridle.

The call for breakfast sounded. Marvel was helping Judith with that important early meal. From time to time, the men looked toward the point where The Poco Kid should appear, hazing the horse-herd inward. But they looked in vain.

"I'm uneasy," Cricket exclaimed, coming to one of his sudden decisions and acting upon it with his forceful energy. He slapped the hull on to his own horse and swung to the saddle, taking a free lope. The closer he got to the second pond-hole, the faster he made his horse go.

Arrived there, he looked about for the remuda.

It was not in sight.

He thought that, perhaps, The Poco Kid had driven the horses by a roundabout course, in order to let them graze

on their way down for the morning roping-out. But, in circling, he found the cause of the disappearance and read the sign in the light sand.

The remuda had been "jumped" in the night, had been driven away, in a compact bunch, by several horsemen, apparently.

The sign of the stolen horses led, straight and true, into the northwest, angling off right across the trail the cattle had made in getting to the upper pond-hole.

The Poco Kid was not in sight.

And where the little camp fire of The Kid had been, Cricket read the signs of the struggle, saw a splotch of rusty color on the sand, and shuddered to think of what it might mean for The Kid.

"But where is the remuda now?" Cricket asked in silence.

CHAPTER XVIII.

DIVIDED FORCES.

"HERE comes Cricket, fairly splittin' the wind," Casey Jones called, and in a moment the Bar C men were afoot.

"How many with the herd?" Cricket demanded, bringing his horse to a swerving stop and alighting on the run.

"Teaser Rines and Jeed," replied Casey Jones.

"They've run off with the remuda ——" Cricket announced.

"Who're 'they?'" Casey Jones asked.

"I don't know. Let's get a-goin'," was the reply.

"You mean that they stole our hosses —where's The Poco Kid?" Marvel Osgood demanded.

"I don't know; he's gone, too," Cricket said.

"Sure the horses didn't stampede on him?" Casey Jones asked.

"I can read sign. Some people jumped those hosses—half a dozen men. I saw where they jumped Poco, too ——" then he saw Marvel's intent look and caught himself up in time. But she demanded more information.

"I think that The Kid's all right. I could see where he rode off, probably after them," Cricket finished lamely. "We've got six hosses, hardly enough to use if the herd gets going on us. We're about afoot," he added.

"Yes, and we ain't got the best hosses, either; they have," Andy Tice mourned.

"Well, there's those wagon bronchos," Judith suggested. "They'd do to ride after those thieves with; wouldn't they?"

"Sure, I never even counted *them* as *hosses,*" Cricket explained.

"I'll take Andy, Teaser and Casey," Cricket decided, "and leave Jeed as straw boss. You two boys can take wagon-bronchos, if they'll stay under you and let you ride them. See that your guns are all right and your thimble-belts full. We four will go after those hosses; Jeed will stay, with the girls and extra men, with the cattle and wagons. Marvel, take a hoss and go tell Jeed. Tell him to send me Teaser Rines back with you. He can catch up to us, ridin' hard. Tell Jeed to use his best judgment, while we're gone, about moving the herd and defendin' the camp, if trouble comes. We're streakin' it now."

Marvel motioned for Cricket to lean down in the saddle while Judith was getting together some food for their saddlebags.

"Cricket—find him! The Poco Kid told me that if anything went wrong with the remuda, he'd sure go through, till he died, but he'd make it good in the end," she said.

"All right, Marvel," he replied, patting the back of her sun-browned hand; and then the three swung off to where Cricket expected to find the trail. Marvel, in the saddle a moment later, streaked it for the herd, not forgetting, though, to draw down to an easy canter, as she neared the cattle, in order to

avoid frightening them into a daylight stampede.

"I don't like that news," Jeed said; "but Cricket had to go. We'll give Teaser our best hoss, and have him help after those nags. We've got five hosses left that savvy cattle; four wagon-bronchos left, too. We can move, but that won't matter, as Cricket and the boys can follow the trail. But we had better stay right put, and wait. I can drive that bunch of cattle around all day and back at night—that pond-hole seems to have filled up over night, so there's most likely a spring in the bottom of it. I noticed at dawn, before I took first-guard on the herd, that it was full again. I suppose that when it gets about so full, the sandy edges take up the overflow. At any rate, it will give us water for the cattle. I don't know the land in front of us. Cricket scouted it earlier this year, but, of course, he's with the boys after that remuda. I think that there's a spade and some shovels with the chuck wagon?" he asked.

Marvel nodded, wondering.

"Stay with these cattle. The fellow that took Teaser's place is all right; Boston is his pet name. I'll go back to camp and start something that's got to be done," Jeed remarked.

Marvel rode to where Boston sat his cayuse and told him further details of the event that had taken Teaser away from the herd and put him on guard over it. Boston simply shook out his belt and drawled:

"Looks like a large, shootin' time was coming, Missy," and then started out to turn back a steer that had ideas of his own.

Meanwhile, Cricket and the boys were burning the trail that the stolen horses had made. It was a broad trail, plain, at first. The wind came up as they rode, and often the sand had already sifted into the tracks, yet they could not be concealed so soon and so easily. The trail wound in and out among the more thickly-placed sand hills as they progressed more deeply into the wastelands. The trail led them into draws and over levels, around the bases of sand hills, and down dry creek-beds that, in rainy seasons, would be roaring torrents. Now, they were green with slight grasses or lush with ribbon-cane, chance-sown by the winds from earlier days when the edges of the sandy stretch were fringed with pitifully weak attempts at homesteading by ill-advised people.

The sun wheeled high, and still they followed the trail. Noon came, and they forced their horses up over the verge of a draw's bank. It was then that, far off to the southwest, they saw the shifting, changing, moving patch on the face of the sandy waste that was the horse-herd.

"There they are," Cricket shouted with glee, standing in the saddle. Their horses were holding out well.

"You can't drive a bunch of hosses as fast as men can ride. They're bound to lose you time by tryin' to stray on you when they get tired of hittin' up the pace," Cricket said, "whereas a hoss under saddle has got to go, whether he wants to or not."

They had just made ready to start again, after a slight halt to breathe their own horses and to tighten cinches, when Cricket pointed off to one side. They saw a man riding toward them, reeling as he came. They could see that he had no saddle and no hat. He held himself together with an effort, but as they reached him he slumped over, calling to them hoarsely:

"Just ahead, boys; they got me, on the jump. But they overlooked a hoss and I forked him and stuck to him. In the back, they got me—lost blood all day—I'd got some of them, but they got me from behind——"

"It's The Poco Kid," and Cricket swung down on the run and caught him

as he fell into his arms. Teaser's rope settled on the neck of the horse that The Kid had been riding bareback.

"Teaser, you stay with The Kid," Cricket decided, after a hasty examination of the wounded man. "He's shot through the fleshy part of the back; he's bled a lot and can't ride any more. Stay with him, and if he gets himself together, go back to camp with him. I and Casey Jones and Andy will stick on this hot trail. Get him down into that last draw, Teaser."

"Go ahead! I'll be all right—with—Old—Teaser," The Kid gasped out encouragement to the pursuers, as they swung away again into the rising warmth of the noon.

Under the shade of the steep cutbank of the draw, The Poco Kid regained strength. Teaser Rines had stanched the flow of blood and washed out the ugly wound with his canteen's contents, after giving The Kid a good swig. As the last of the water was used in dressing the wound, The Kid murmured:

"Teaser, did you have a drink?"

"Sure," Teaser quieted his bunkie with a mild fib.

"You're a liar, by the watch, you old hoss thief," The Kid said affectionately.

"How're you feelin'? Could you ride?" Teaser asked.

"Yes—go after Cricket and the boys; I'll make the grade."

"Cricket ordered me to stay with you," Teaser remarked.

"I'm no yearlin'," was The Kid's reply.

"I'm stayin', though," Teaser said firmly.

"Afraid to get into the scrap that's coming?" The Kid asked with a weak grin.

"If any one else said that," scowlingly intimated Teaser.

"Go after Cricket, then. I'll make the grade. Get me onto that cayuse, and I'll stick her out till night. I'll be close to the herd then. I'll make the grade, Teaser," The Kid assured him.

"You sure?" Teaser asked, looking toward the direction Cricket had taken with eyes of longing, that deepened as The Kid murmured a coaxing:

"Dead center certain."

"Then I ain't going; I'm staying with you. You're a liar."

Poco Kid tried to argue, but just then his face went white, and he fainted from sheer weakness.

CHAPTER XIX.

DOG-HOLE.

FOLLOWING still that signal-cloud made by the driven horse-herd, Cricket, Casey Jones and Andy Tice kept to the trail. They had the direction of the chase. They were able to cut across loops in it, at times, when the horse-herd, tired of being driven, tried to break back.

In mid-afternoon they were close up, close enough to make out that eight men drove the horses. They knew that they had been seen.

It was Cricket who gave the warning:

"Half of those hoss thieves have disappeared, boys. On that last rise, eight were seen; now it's four; look out for an ambush."

"They wouldn't be sending us visitors, unless they wanted to play some mean game," Casey Jones remarked.

"A fight won't get us anything right now. I'm goin' to play foxy," Cricket announced, as four men rode into sight around the shoulder of the nearest sand hill on their right.

They drew up. Cricket had adopted an appearance of fright. The four hard-eyed horse thieves came forward, scowling and evidently out to frighten the trio of pursuers.

"Howdy," Cricket greeted them.

"You lost anything?" the red-bearded leader asked.

"Some hosses, yes," Cricket replied.

"Well, we ain't seen them," was the answer.

"Oh, I thought that those hosses ahead might be ours?" Cricket ventured.

"You ain't meaning that we're hoss thieves?" came the menacing question.

"No—say, mister, we don't want no fight."

"All right; split the wind, then," was the order.

"Boys, we better get out of here," Cricket whined.

"I'm on my way right now," Casey Jones echoed, whirling his horse. Andy Tice followed his lead. The three rode off, looking back from time to time, and they were followed by a burst of mean laughter and taunts.

"What was the play?" Casey Jones asked Cricket, as they reined up behind a sand hill.

"Those guys each have a short carbine in a saddle-sheath; we've got six-guns only. We couldn't reach them handy at the range they set for us; they could have cut down all our hosses and set us afoot, right out in the middle of this sandy waste. What would've been the answer?" Cricket explained.

"You're right, son," Andy Tice had to admit.

"As it is, we can keep right on the trail, but I'm goin' off to one side. They'll have an eagle-eye watching to plug our hosses, and we want to give him lots of space," Cricket went on.

Now they circled again, far to the east. As they rode, Cricket discussed his further reasons for turning back without a fight.

"They'd never have run that blazer on us, except that they wanted to rest those hosses. They must have a hide-out place handy and wanted us off the trail, so that we wouldn't stumble on to it, following those nags," he said.

Cricket kept them going on that route for half an hour, when they rested their horses till toward evening. Then he led them back to the trail again, and they took it up.

"There'll be enough starlight to follow that trail after dark; we can travel fast, then," Cricket told them. "I hope that those hard-eyed gents believed us when we acted yellow."

"If they didn't, we'll stop some lead passin' by some of these sand heaps," Andy Tice gave as his opinion.

"If they hadn't believed us yellow, they'd have started it, right then," Casey Jones put in.

Their horses were all the better for the halt and now made fair time. They had not ridden their horses "all out" during the long day's chase, but had simply kept them moving at a fast shuffle that had put the miles behind at a good average for each one traveled.

There was no mistaking the trail. The white sand patches showed the sign on the lifts of the ridges plainly; and, in every roll between sand hills, the tracks showed under the starlight to eyes accustomed to judge of the least disturbance of the ground over which they swept.

"I'd sure like to know what's going on back with the herd," Cricket said, as the night darkened. Clouds scudded low at a breath of chilly wind. The sign faded from their strained vision as the stars were blotted out.

Now they rode in a general line, one of them dismounting at times to feel for the sign in the trampled soil. Sometimes they lost it; circling, they found it, but they were losing time.

"I'm going to follow a hunch and ride straight," Cricket told the other two. They expostulated, urging him to stay with the sign.

"We can come back on our own sign and find it in the morning, if we have to," he reminded them.

"I don't like this blind ridin'," Casey Jones found fault, and Andy Tice added his plaint to the old trail-veteran's.

"It's a gamble, but in gamblin' always

follow hunches," Cricket advised them, lifting his horse to a little higher lope.

Suddenly they jumped a bunch of cattle that had been bedded down on a little knoll. The cattle started away, snorting and blowing.

"I didn't know that there was any cattle in here," Cricket exclaimed, "unless it was wild cattle or surly old bulls that had been driven out of herds and were campin' out in these sand hills. I was warned against such on my drive for information up this way in the spring."

"Those cattle were not wild. We'd have been charged by some old stager if they were," Casey Jones went over the evidence of the happening logically, just as Andy Tice said:

"Hark!"

They listened in silence for a moment. Cricket asked:

"What did you hear?"

"It wasn't what I heard: it was what I don't hear," said Andy Tice.

"I don't make you yet," Cricket replied.

"Those cattle ain't making any more noise gettin' away."

"No—what's the answer? Have they stopped?" persisted Cricket.

"No—not that——" Andy remarked tersely.

"I know now," said Cricket, slapping his chapped thigh resoundingly. "They have pitched over a bank, into a draw or——"

"Into a sink-hole," Casey Jones finished.

"Yes and they may be the beef-herd of some of those crooked outfits. I'm goin' to see what the ground says," Cricket remarked.

Cricket got down and walked around, laughing.

"Pretty good grass underfoot. That's it—those cattle belong to some of these crooked hide-out outfits in this fryin' pan country. We'll go ahead now, and see where they went to," he said.

"And be mighty watchful, too," Casey Jones warned. "Those cattle stampedin' home that way may start our friends to inquiring who's on the trail this late in the night."

"And we'll not be where they think that we ought to be," Cricket planned. "Let's ride to one side, then circle till we're in line with this place. I've got an idea."

"Be sure that it don't hurt your brain," Andy Tice growled, good-naturedly.

By that time, they had circled and come back to what Cricket took to be a direct line with their former course. They heard a horse pass them at a slow walk, heard a man grumble. They kept their own horses silent by putting their hands over their noses. The horse of the rider neighed, but he was sleepily at odds with the faithful beast:

"Now don't get funny, you ornery broncho——" and he was out of hearing back along the trail that the cattle had taken in stampeding. The trio found the break in the rim and went down over it, waiting at an elbow of the slanting trail and listening. Below they could hear cattle snuffling and gently lowing.

"We'll go right down; if we wait here, his hoss will warn him," Cricket told them. And the two agreed with his judgment. They gentled the horses down, and finally struck the level; cattle galloped warily away.

"You take the hosses, Casey," Cricket gave his orders; "he'll be comin' back soon to make some kind of a report to his boss, whoever he may be. My rope goes for him; yours, Andy, for his hoss. His hoss will be watching our hosses that he'll see in the dark off to one side, and that rider'll be trying to figure out what it all means. He'll be easy. He's sore at being routed off his bed-ground, where he was supposed to be on guard when those cattle went by

him, and he's puzzled because he didn't find anything to explain it all."

They swung down, and Casey Jones took the horses off to one side. Andy and Cricket shook out their loops. Then all was silent again, save for the snuffling of the cattle, that were alarmed over the presence of the newcomers. Cricket heard the rider angling down the trail first and whispered a warning to Andy. He heard Andy shaking out his loop so that it would be alive and ready, and Cricket did the same—the ropes talking whisperingly to the grass-tops.

The bulk of the rider loomed between them and the sky, as they flipped their loops from the trail-side. The ropes went true; the horse danced; the rider came over sidewise, cursing as he fell. Cricket was on him in a moment, to prevent his drawing and letting go a signal shot; Andy snubbed the wild horse in his dancing.

"Where's the hang-out?" Cricket demanded.

"You know where you can go," came the answer harshly.

"All right, Mr. Tight-mouth, but I'll bet that your hoss will tell us."

They bound the prisoner to his horse, lashing his wrists to the saddle horn. Then they grouped behind the horse, after having cut the bridle reins off, so that they wouldn't be available for the prisoner or get under the feet of the horse. The horse seemed undecided for a time, then struck off steadily. The three were after him.

"My gun's right in line with your back," Cricket warned. "I'd not mind an excuse to bore you. That hoss would go to where he gets his corn and water and a chance to rest, with you dead, so don't make any mistakes, now."

The fellow was silent. The horse took them forward evenly, evidently being used to wandering in toward morning on that home-trail.

"I see buildin's; no lights," Casey Jones warned, after half an hour of that slow progress.

"These hosses of ours ain't in shape for us to have to make a slope of it, and them after us with fresh hosses," Tice reminded Cricket.

"You keep this man, and I'll go forward and see."

The two halted with the prisoner. Cricket dismounted and stole forward afoot. He expected to hear a dog, but none bayed. It seemed too easy. Cricket made out a corral. He got to the side of it and heard horses snort. He picked up a clod and threw it.

At once, he heard several horses snort, and stamp, and run. He was very quiet. He judged that about six or seven horses were in that corral. Gun ready, Cricket waited till he heard a man coming stealthily around the bulge of the corral fence. Then, rising suddenly, Cricket dropped him with a blow over the temple with the barrel of his heavy gun. The horses snorted and milled in the corral. Cricket tied the fellow up with his own belt, got his gun, and belt of shells, and went around the corral. The house, squatting sinisterly ahead on the level, he eyed askance for a moment, then approached. He saw that the shades were down; lights were going behind them. He peered through a crack in the shade of one window and counted six men in there. One was Arizona Shallum. They were playing cards.

"I wonder what those hosses were snortin' for?" Arizona asked, of no one in particular.

"Oh, a coyote around, most likely. Cosden would've headed off any one at the top of the trail. No one has yet found the way into Dog Hole that wasn't wanted down here, Arizona."

The game was resumed.

Cricket stepped away from the house and went to the corral, around that, and then lined up the group with the first captive. He reached them warily,

whispering his warning from a distance, as agreed. He told the two what he had found. Cricket made a direct verbal attack upon the captive:

"Cosden, where are those hosses that you stole from that trail outfit?"

"How did you know that my name was Cosden?" the captive asked.

"I guessed it, maybe," Cricket replied.

"Then as you're so good at guessin', maybe you can guess the place that that herd is at," the other said; chuckling meanly.

"There's a big posse out. We know that Arizona is with you. We're goin' to clean this outfit's clock right soon," Cricket announced.

"I ain't seen any outfit," growled the man.

"Well, I'll give you a chance, Cosden. You'll yell at them in that cabin that a big gang's coming or you'll get shot," and Cricket's gun thudded against Cosden's short ribs. "Make a quick choice," he said.

"Now you're talkin' man-talk. All right, what's the play?"

"Do as we say and we'll turn you loose, and you can fan it."

"All right; I aim to be absent a whole lot," Cosden promised.

Cricket cut his bonds, and they waited a moment to let him get back circulation in his limbs. Once, during this interval, the cabin door opened; and, in the shaft of light from the doorway, they could see the smoke-wreathed interior of the room. Then the door was shut with a growling phrase about:

"No one in sight; nothin' stirrin' at all."

They had taken Cosden's carbine and shell-belts and two six-guns. Cricket admonished him:

"I'm right with you to see that you follow orders. You get your hoss, that's all, and you fan it after you've yelled as per my orders."

Cricket strode at Cosden's side as he rode toward the cabin, the horse at a quick walk. Cricket's gun was against Cosden's side as he leaned forward and bawled:

"Boys—a big posse comin' fast—fan it, pronto."

Then Cosden's horse was released by Cricket, who slatted it in the face with his hat. The horse whirled and Cosden clung as it bucked into the night. Cricket heard the scramble inside. The men came streaming out, running about for a moment in distraction. The door stood wide open. Cricket jerked his gun into the room through the wide-open door and shattered the light.

At the sound of the shot the horse thieves shouted in surprise. From behind them a carbine snarled a ball over their heads. They leaped for the corral.

Cricket darted in the door of the cabin, having sighted the stacked carbines in the interior, in a far corner. He gathered them up and set them outside the door. He found a match, risked the flare of it, found the oil pool from the shattered lamp, touched it off, stood erect in the glare and saw two rifles on a deer-antler rack over the fireplace. He got them and ran out. This had taken barely a half minute. As he emerged, the oil had started a lively flame.

Cricket could hear the popping of Cosden's carbine, now in safer hands than his and the boom of a six-gun, that told him that the horse thieves had found the corral empty and had circled it, to become targets of Andy Tice and Casey Jones. Cricket went off into the open, hopeful that he would not be mistaken for one of the horse thieves by his friends.

The burning cabin was now to be seen, standing out against the darkness —fire eddying about its interior. The horse thieves, bunching, came around the corral again. Cricket took up a carbine and, squatting in the grass, began to burn a half circle in front of

himself with the rattling fire that he pumped against them. The terrified men faltered, broke, and quickly scattered.

"Now, all charge in and finish the whelps," Cricket yelled—this time from another position that he had taken up quickly. Again he pumped lead toward the place where he had last seen the horse thieves.

Suddenly he heard a horse running. He cut loose in the direction of the flight of the man, but only the low, mocking laugh of Arizona came back to him, and he heard one of the horse thieves yell:

"He hid his hoss out on stake somewhere after dark, and he's quittin' on us. Scatter, boys, and save yourselves on foot, as best you can."

Then there was a growing silence.

Andy crept down to where Cricket was and then Casey Jones, who was leading the horses. The cabin continued to burn. They remained outside the fireglow, edging farther and farther back.

Dawn found them hidden in a little clump of shrubbery half a mile from the burned cabin. No one was to be seen. Now, with the dawn to help, they located the big corral, up the sink, where the stolen horses were. They got to it without encountering any resistance and let the horses out, herding them forward.

"I'm thinkin' that this about reverses the plan," Casey Jones chuckled: "yesterday mornin' we were afoot. Now, this hoss thief outfit is afoot. I wonder if we hit any of them."

"Well, I wasn't shootin' to miss," Cricket replied. "I've lost enough sleep to feel plumb mean anyway, and I wasn't easy on those that caused all our troubles."

"I guess none of us were," Andy spoke promptly. "We won't miss no bets gettin' out of this sink. It's sure a dandy hole-up place, and wouldn't make a bad homestead. There must be water somewhere."

They saw nothing of the horse thieves on the way out. At the lower end of the sink they found a water-hole and let the equine herd enjoy a treat there, giving them both water and grass. While they grazed the men took turns in napping. It was mid-forenoon before they were ready to attempt the drive up the sloping trail out of the sink. They got out without incident and were starting off through the sand hills again, on their return trip, when the horses circled back, snorting and blowing.

A shot sounded; a ball snarled; Cricket loosed the carbine under his knee with a single clutching jerk. And, then, they were all shooting while the horses scattered and disappeared amidst the sand hills on either hand and ahead.

CHAPTER XX.

STAMPEDED.

OLD JEED worried. After Cricket, Andy, Casey Jones, and Teaser had gone, he felt the weight of a great responsibility on him. He had the cattle, themselves worth a sum greater than Old Jeed ever could hope to possess. He had the two girls, and he was not unmindful that forces unscrupulous enough to steal a whole remuda would not hesitate to harm the pretty saddle partners of the Bar C. Boston was an experienced trail-hand from old times. The younger extra men had courage but, as Jeed phrased it, were "short on savvy."

He trusted the trail-herd to Boston and two of the extra men; the other two he took with him back to the wagons. He had the chuck wagon and the bed-roll wagon drawn up in a V; in the space between he began to dig up the sand, laying it up till the wheels were piled high and the space under the wagons filled. He packed this hard,

and had the young fellows dig enough sand to make a little bank along the open end of the V. In an hour, they had a fine deep rifle pit made, into which Jeed had the food from the wagon moved. He had every available receptacle filled with water and these set in order in the bottom of the pit.

"Now let 'em come," he said. "Judith, I'd about like to have them come against us now."

Leaving the girls with the wagons, with a man to act as guard, the old fellow rode off to the herd, that meanwhile, had been grazed out and in a circle back toward the lower pond-hole. There they were given a chance to drink at dusk, and then pointed up to their old bed-ground of the night before. The evening stars were setting the firmament aglow, when Jeed got the herd bedded down to his satisfaction. Leaving Boston on first guard, with another man, he went back to the camp. Patches of fair ground, between the sandy stretches, had been found during the day, and these, carpeted with grass, had furnished grazing.

He praised Judith and Marvel for their cookery, made fun for them all, but they could tell that he was under a strain of suppressed excitement.

"Jeed, you can't fool us. You expect an attack?" Judith asked.

"Sure; if Cricket and the boys had got back with those hosses during the day, I'd not look for trouble to-night, but the fact that they ain't in speaks for more trouble," the old man replied.

"Don't you borrow any trouble; you never can pay it back," Marvel tried to pass off the tense feeling with a teasing jest.

"I ain't borrowing any; it'll come running," Jeed countered.

He took a guard, so that Boston and his companion could come in and eat. He found the cattle contented and all seemed so well that the old-timer felt heartened as he heard Boston coming, singing as he came, to take up the watch-guard again.

"I'll send a man over about midnight, Boston; if they start, stick to them."

"Sure will, boss," the man heartily replied.

Jeed found everything at the camp all right.

They let the fire go down to gray-ash embers. The horses, tied to the wagon wheels and pole, fretted some, but finally quieted down.

Now the little camp seemed peaceful enough. Some frogs out in the pond-hole began to croak, and afar a coyote yapped and "yarrrred."

The coyote broke off in the middle of a long "yarrrrr!" so suddenly that it sounded uncanny. Then the frogs stopped their croaking. A horse snorted and stamped and Jeed, lining the ears of the horses up against the starlight, saw that they were all pointed one way. He spoke to the extra men quietly. Judith and Marvel were awake and alert in a second.

The break came with startling suddenness—a streak of flame arching over, a soft thud, a light on the far side of the chuck wagon, a light that flickered and a crackling sound.

"Injun tactics," Jeed whispered, but one was as quick as he to discover the peril, for Judith, leaping out of the rifle pit, grasped the wagon seat, swung into the wagon, and leaned over the side. As she pulled the flaming arrow out of the wood, her arm and upper body were revealed. Bullets whizzed into the wagon. Judith felt the sear of a ball across her shoulder, as she drew back and fell from the wagon seat into the pit again, holding the still smoking and glowing arrow. Jeed stepped on it like a flash, and then a line of flame pitted the darkness out in the open. A horse screamed in pain; another tore loose.

Again a flaming arrow arched over. This time Jeed marked where the base of the arc was and let drive. A yell of

pain came to them. Now the girls began to smoke the edges of the pit with their steady fire, and the extra men added their fire to the total, lining their sights carefully and firing only at flashes. Cries of pain came to them—the flaming arrow had missed.

"We've got them stood off," Jeed rejoiced.

The firing outside died down.

"Hold your fire," Jeed ordered.

He peered out. Half of the horses were either down or gone.

Jeed remarked wrathfully on the character of the attackers, daring them to come on and fight. But only silence answered him.

"I think that we got the better of it," Jeed spoke exultantly. "We lost some more hosses, but when the boys get back with that remuda, we won't miss them very——"

"Keep quiet, what's that?" Judith spoke sharply.

They heard the starting rumble, the momentary pause, then, flashes, and reports, off where the herd was and the long, earth-shaking roar as the cattle started.

"They've stampeded them on us," Jeed yelled, jumping out of the pit. Regardless of possible peril, near at hand, the others came after him. No gunfire from their late attackers greeted them, though.

"This fight here was just to cover the stampede of the herd," Judith exclaimed.

"Well, some of them didn't find it funny. We got some of them," Jeed took what comfort he could from the situation. "And I'm bettin' that they didn't get those cattle going without hearing from Old Boston and that other extra man."

"What shall we do?" Marvel asked.

"We might go after that herd, but we won't. That would suit them too well. They'd circle back, and loot, and burn the wagons, and leave us not only afoot and without a herd, but starvin', as well. That herd will leave a trail that can be followed. And when the boys get back, we'll go after that herd and go a-smokin'," Jeed replied.

"But suppose they got Boston and that other man?" Judith asked.

"I told them that if it came to a fight, I'd keep control of what hosses I could save, the wagons, and the grub. They understood and was satisfied to take their chances," was the answer.

Nor would he change his mind. The girls were for going right out into the open and finding out what had become of Boston and his riding partner, but Jeed would not permit this.

The silence was broken only by the noises made by the wounded horses. Jeed ventured out and cut the tie-ropes of the two wounded animals, and they drifted away. Two on the ground were dead; they had four effective mounts now; Boston and the other man might have two, one, or no horses, as luck might have used them.

Now the camp quieted down again. The stars wheeled, and faint dawn was coming. Jeed, wakeful, saw the blur along the ground and started to shoot, when he heard Teaser Rines' voice:

"What's happened here; come help me get The Poco Kid in."

They swarmed out to help the wounded lad in. Marvel soon had him propped up on some equipment, where she could see that his wound was properly dressed. Teaser told them that they had heard the distant sound of shots and had crept up after the attackers had gone. They had decided to wait till dawn and, in fact, were unable to do anything else. Their horses were so exhausted that they had left them out in the open two miles back, so that they could not have started after the herd with them, even if they had heard the stampede.

Teaser told Jeed all about The Poco Kid's experiences, and how Cricket and

the others had left in search of the stolen remuda.

"I think that they'll be gone some days, too, by the way those hoss thieves were a-travelin' when we last saw them," The Poco Kid managed to whisper, his head in Marvel's lap.

"Say, I'll stand being shot, if you'll let me change places with you," Teaser Rines pleaded.

"No; that wound is plumb painful, but it's worth it to draw this kind of treatment," The Kid answered.

Marvel's soft palm over his mouth stopped his joking.

"The funny thing about this is that Judith don't seem to get any chance to show off her wisdom," Teaser aimed a shaft at Judith.

"If it was Cricket Bursand that was shot——," Marvel began, when Judith, in her turn, got her hand where it would shut off Marvel's teasing.

"I'm going out and look things over," Jeed told them. He left the rifle pit, and soon called them out to see that two of the attackers had been killed the night before. Burial of the dead was easy in the soft, sandy soil. That done, they proceeded back to the rifle pit, when Jeed made his decision:

"With Teaser and The Kid in, I feel stronger——"

"I think that we're goin' to have more with us," and Teaser pointed toward the northeast. Boston and his partner were riding in. Boston's face was bruised; his partner had a bandage around his head. The party ran out to meet them.

"More work for the nurse," Jeed said.

"I'll let Judith have those patients," Marvel said.

"Well, I'm not kickin'," Boston made grim rejoinder. "Jeed, they jumped us, for fair. They creased me, so that I bled till I couldn't see; and they shot Curley's scalp-lock in twain. We stuck after them and got the general direction of their drive. They're pushing those cattle for high water. I think that it was part of the Tawlton gang. I saw one man, when a flash lit up his face, and he looked to me like Old Gabe Tawlton. They had rifles, and we only had sixes. They'd killed us, if we'd closed. I followed directions, that you gave me, in case of a run, to stick with them till I got the direction of the drive and then come back, if I could, and report."

"Which is true and lets you out," Jeed agreed.

Boston and Curley had their wounds dressed by Judith. It was now agreed that they had sufficient guns to stand off an attack, even after splitting forces again.

"I'll take the best hosses and the unwounded men," Jeed announced, "and we'll get on the trail of those cow thieves right soon."

At noon, Jeed, having made sure that the horses that they took were grazed and watered, rode away with Teaser and the extra men that were unwounded. He left instructions that those in the rifle pit should under no circumstances leave that vicinity, but should guard the food, the remaining horses, and the wagons. It was then only, with the crisis past, that Marvel learned that Judith was slightly wounded in the shoulder, and dressed her friend's injury.

Riding warily, yet swiftly, Jeed pushed forward with his party through the afternoon hours. They found where the herd had been pressed hard, had tried to break back, had milled, and where the mill had been broken by sending riders through the circling cattle. The trail swung to the left. The sign told that the size of the drag was increasing, as the cattle grew sullen and resisted pressure to make them travel faster. But the cattle thieves seemed to be masters of their craft, for the herd had been kept going.

The afternoon hours sped; the sun wheeled down and was low.

Suddenly, ahead, they saw the herd, appearing from behind a big, dark-hued sand hill.

Flashes came from the rear of the herd, that was running and crowding in wave after wave of panic-stricken cattle.

Jeed and his men charged forward, hardly knowing what to do or what they would find.

"They're smokin' them from behind," Jeed yelled, "tryin' to turn them. Fool work—they ought to be in front for that——"

He jerked out his gun and whirled it up and over as dark figures came crashing through the scattering cattle.

"Put that gun down—it's Cricket!" shouted Teaser.

Cricket, Andy Tice and Casey Jones came out of the murk made by the milling cattle. Cricket waved his hand, having recognized his friends. They rode to him and he called:

"Those rustlers are on the other side; we turned the herd by charging it, and droppin' their point-man; we charged right through them, and now we're goin' back. Come on, boys."

With Cricket in the lead, they struck the terrorized cattle again and came bursting through the living screen of beeves. On the far side were the hard-eyed rustlers, who seeing them coming back reënforced, gave ground and began to quirt their horses. Guns going, Cricket and his men charged forward, and were satisfied to see several of the fleeing cattle thieves reel in the saddle. The lead that they threw back at the Bar C men whistled close; and twice men grunted with pain.

"Come back, men," Cricket called. "Let's keep the cattle, now that we've got them and get our forces together."

"Where's the remuda?" Jeed demanded.

"Off in a draw. We left it there when we saw those cow thieves coming, and they've gone off in another direction, so those hosses will be safe. They are too tired to give any bother by another run, and these cattle are about ready to bed down anywhere."

"We'll keep them going till we get back to those pond-holes, and make a fresh start. Tell us about what happened."

There followed a short period of excited talk, during which each side was informed of the haps and mishaps of the other.

"When we got out of that Dog Hole," Cricket finished, "we found some of those devils ambushed against us, but we soon routed them and they went away on foot. There must've been two gangs of them, one told off to get the herd, the other to get the hosses. Well, we've stood them off so far, so now let's get on our way back to the wagons—and coffee!"

It was long after dark, when the very tired cattle bedded down on their old ground near the pond-hole, too tired, in fact, to graze before lying down. A reunion took place in the big rifle pit and about the wagons. Teaser Rines took the recovered remuda over to the second pond-hole. And, with the dawn, account was taken of losses. It was decided to remain where they were for several days to let the cattle and horses recuperate.

CHAPTER XXI.

"NEXT TIME!"

ON the morning that the recuperated Bar C outfit left the pond-hole section, the region was seemingly deserted for a long time. Then, from the south, four moving specks appeared, long after the herd had vanished on its winding course among the sand hills. While not a great deal of grass had been found within grazing distance of the pond-holes, enough dried grass had been found to keep the cattle and horses par-

tially contented. This was considered important by Cricket, as it enabled him to keep his outfit together until the wounded men could be well cared for. With the pond-holes as a center, the herds had been grazed out and back ten or twelve miles in every direction. In some draws, they had found milo maize growing wild in scattered patches; in others, young ribbon-cane was grazed down eagerly by the cattle.

The four moving specks that approached the pond-hole section, resolved themselves into four riders. As they drew closer to the big pond-hole, where the rifle pit had been defended so well, they swung down and watered their horses.

"Well, Mr. Tawlton," the chunky, florid leader spoke sharply; "we didn't make much headway against them."

"No, sir," the hard-eyed old rustler replied, "that Bar C lot are hard on the bit and don't give ground."

"I think that more might've been done——" the other began.

"Now, see here, Mr. Town King," the old rustler interrupted, "I done my best. I wanted those cattle and that remuda. Those men burned me out at home in Dog's Hole. They've shot up a lot of my best men, and run off a lot of my best hosses. I don't think that our gang will get over what they did to us for a long time."

"That's nothing to me," the leader announced.

"But to me it is. Now, don't squeal. We did our best, and no one can do more than that. I'll take that money, right now," said the old man.

His voice had taken on an accent of finality. Bullis looked toward Arizona and Dernold. They were looking away. Reluctantly he handed over some money that Tawlton counted and then rode away without a word of farewell.

"Why didn't you back me up?" Bullis asked of his two retainers.

"I ain't starting anything against Old Gabe Tawlton," Arizona made haste to confess.

"No one does; he's bad," Dernold said.

"But I thought that you two would ——" began Bullis.

"Not against Old Gabe. I'm fast, and Dernold ain't slow, but Old Gabe could have killed us all before we could have got ready to get him. People let that old man alone."

"Then I suppose that we must begin all over again?" Bullis said rather disconsolately, as he glanced at each in turn.

"Yes, sir," Dernold held out farther hope at once, "we've not got their herd or hosses, but we've put those cattle in bad shape. If we can only keep them stampeding, we can make them worthless for market, even if he gets them through."

"And as I look at it, we've got to keep him going now. If he gets into Hanseburg and sells those cattle at a good price, he'll have plenty of money to get after us with. If he gets in there broke, he won't be able to hire a lawyer to begin suits for damages or to get the law-folks busy on our trail," Arizona put forth new temptations for continued activity against Bar C.

"I'm getting a bit superstitious about this game," Bullis said. "Ever since I started to buck Cricket Bursand, he's been able to win, point after point——"

"And he may yet win, with that Patterson girl," Dernold played what he thought would be his final card.

At the mention of Judith, Bullis at once showed new interest. He walked about, hands behind his back, thinking deeply.

"Then there's that other pretty one—that Osgood filly," Arizona continued. "Suppose we got them in our hands; we could draw that whole outfit away from their camp and cattle and——"

"That's the kind of talk," Bullis decided suddenly—"that or one of those

plays you spoke of—putting the cattle into a sink-hole or trapping them in ribbon-cane country and firing the tall cane——"

"There are still lots of ways to wreck Bursand's plans," Bullis went on; "we've simply got to lay him out, cold, or he'll get public sympathy that always goes to a victor in a row with a corporation, and nothing that we can do will stop him. What do we care about the outcome, boys, I've got backing that can't be beat and plenty of money to spend on this. Here, boys,"—producing a fat wallet and counting out a pile of bills to each, as their hands were extended for the money—"this is just expense money like the last. At the end, a thousand apiece. How is that? It's double what I promised, besides this expense money is extra."

"Mr. Bullis," Arizona answered, "for what you're payin' I'd wade through trouble up to my bridle-bits, and don't you forget it."

"Here, too," Dernold replied. "Next time it'll be different."

"Well, then, let's go right after them again. We're really working in the public interest, for if Bursand starts trail-driving again through here, he will stir the other ranchers up, and we'll have conditions that may lead to another range war," Bullis declared.

"Sure, boss," Dernold said, salving the railroad czar's conscience; "we understand just what you mean."

"I think that a play against those girls will be about our next trump," Arizona returned to the subject that suited him best.

"We can't expect any more help from the Tawltons?" Bullis queried.

"No, Bar C shook them up so that they won't fight again for a long time. They always thought that that hidden sink-hole of theirs was safe from attack, but Bar C turned it inside out and made a wreck of it," Arizona remarked.

"Well, we three are not hurt yet and have still got a good reason for going ahead," Bullis said decisively.

"Sure we have," Dernold agreed.

"That's right," from Arizona.

But, curiously enough, they were both looking at the place where that fat wallet was buttoned inside the coat of Bullis. And as Bullis rode away in the lead, Dernold leaned over and whispered to Arizona: "As long as that holds out, we have a good reason, anyhow."

Arizona winked knowingly, and they shook hands as they rode behind Bullis.

CHAPTER XXII.

INTO THE MAW OF DANGER.

LEAVING the pond-hole section, Bar C had better going. The grazing was still scattered, and the cattle and horses had to nip and pick, except when they struck infrequent draws, in which better grass was to be found. At times, it seemed that the horses and cattle had hardly anything to eat, yet they kept their strength. No alarms occurred. There were no night runs. The one stampede had not spoiled the well broken herd of beeves.

The wounds of the men healed rapidly, being mostly deep flesh lesions that yielded to skilled dressing by Judith and Marvel, while the open air life that the men led and the plain food kept them well. As for her own shoulder-sear, Judith made little of it.

The Poco Kid admitted to Teaser Rines that, once his wound was healed, Marvel Osgood had found him less interesting. In fact, she now seemed to give Teaser the inside track and The Kid was correspondingly gloomy, except when the men made so much fun of him that he had to smile. Fuel was very scarce, and what water they found was poor. Yet all such things passed as part of the fortunes of the drive, and were accepted cheerfully by the men and girls.

The routine was monotonous—the herd in motion early, the morning drift for grazing, the noon-day halt for cud-chewing, then another drift and the bedding down. The remuda traveled off to one side, two men with it now. The girls kept behind, off to the other side. And the drag was larger than at any time since the beginning of the drive, for the sand now became coarse and more like fine, sharp gravel, and this, working up between the cloves of the hoofs of the beeves, was making them somewhat tender-footed. Yet, between the sand stretches, they found patches of fair soil, on which was grazing for the herd.

Only the unusual rains of that spring had brought grass enough to give any hope at all of getting the herd through in good shape.

Cricket renewed his attempts to make Judith say that, at the end of the drive, she would forego her plans for going East for a medical education, yet he was not able to change her set phrase:

"I'm goin' East when those beeves are sold, and be a doctor."

First in the saddle every morning, and last out of it at night, Cricket scouted before, on either side, and behind the herd, ever on the alert for any new demonstration by their foes. That they were through with the attempts to stop the drive, or, at least, to render it unprofitable, Cricket did not believe; and, in this belief, he was backed up by the two veterans, Casey Jones and Old Jeed.

The fourth day away from the pond-hole section, Cricket left on his usual forward scout to make sure of keeping to the line of watering places that he had sighted out earlier in the year. The heavy dew on the grass early each morning had helped satisfy the animals, despite the scarcity and poor quality of the water.

Cricket was constantly on the alert for signs of riders—missing no opportunity to scout out the land for hidden nooks in the rolling country to the east and west, penetrating every depression, and scanning the tops of ridges. Occasionally he saw wild horses, flights of cranes, plover and snipe, or the gray form of the scudding lobo wolf as he loped away from sight of the lone rider.

That day he found no water within reach of the herd, if an ordinary drive was made. He made his plans upon returning to the herd at noon. He called Jeed, Casey Jones, Teaser, The Poco Kid and the others to him as the herd, spread out fan-wise, drifted along, about ready to drop down and chew the cud for the mid-day rest-spell.

"There'll be a good moon late to-night. We'll bed them down as usual, but they'll be restless, not having had their drink. We'll push them off the bed-ground with the earliest rays of the big moon, and start them ahead. If we work quietly, they'll march again. We'll hit water about noon to-morrow—a lake that was big when I saw it earlier this year. It's dried down now to a few acres, but the bottom's firm and clayish, so that they can wade out and drink, say a couple of hundred at a time."

The herd behaved well that day and there were no alarms. Steadily the cattle plodded, and they pushed them well into the dusk, tiring them with purpose to make them drop down at the end of the trail, even though they had not had a drink during the day.

The men remained with the herd as the dark came on, eating in the saddle the snacks that Judith had given them. The girls, with the wagons, were anxious. The cattle did not all lie down at a time. They were up and down, snuffling, pawing, then down, then up again. The more restless ones passed to and fro among the groups lying down, bumming their way from edge to edge of the herd, and trying to rout other cattle to their feet. These bum-

mers would break away from the herd, only to be sent back into it again by some agile cow pony, who knew what was expected of him.

The darkness of the early hours of the night was intense; the cattle, on their knoll, were a mere blur in time. Complaining rumbles passed through the herd; several times they all got up and seemed about to start in a panic, then lay down again as the soft crooning of the riders came to them reassuringly. The riders circled, ever on the alert. The thirsty cattle, uneasy over the break in their routine, fretted. The bummers would not let the others get much rest at first, then the reserves of moisture in each animal were called up by necessity, and the herd yielded to cud-chewing.

"Now, boys, two at a time, go get your fresh hosses," Cricket advised. "When we start them, every man wants to be in the saddle and right behind them. They'll be confused, and it'll be about all drag till we get them lined out. Tell the girls to break camp and come right along. Jeed, get a lantern off the wagons and go well out in front and hold it down beside your hoss; it will be a guide till the moon comes."

In half an hour the fresh horses were under the men, the wagons were reported ready to start. Cricket gave the signal, and the whistle sounded as in the morning. The beeves got afoot quietly and started off after their leaders, that knew Casey Jones as a friend by now, and the night march began. As Cricket had predicted, the herd became confused after a few moments of marching and the drag became larger and larger. The big drag wanted to mill, but the riders broke this up with steady pressure and vocal restraints to which the cattle yielded. There were no rushes at the cattle, no curses, no loud words. The men of the Bar C were too good cowmen to lose their temper with their bovine charges. It was the steady, disciplined pressure of humans against the dull, aimless force of the cattle, and the human will won.

Out in front, Old Jeed rode steadily, the light as a guide to Casey Jones, on the point. The cattle lined out finally, and accepted the situation. Cricket was on all sides of the herd, encouraging his men, listening to the words of Boston and Casey Jones, going ahead to talk with Old Jeed, back again in a wide swing to the now diminishing drag, and then to see that the girls were on their way with the wagons. It was a great relief to the young drove-master's mind, when he realized that the cattle were marching again, a low, rumbling sound going from point to drag, as if in protest against the unusual procedure. The clicking of hoofs, the rattling of horn on horn, the singing of the cowboys made a pleasing medley.

Then the East silvered; the three-quarter moon came up; the herd was beautified as the moon glints were reflected on horn and eye of each marching animal. The herd seemed to take new courage then. Jeed put out his lantern, and came back to take the point with Casey Jones again. Cricket went back to the drag and circled to make sure that the remuda was all right.

Nothing seemed out of place; the night drive was starting off successfully.

"Keep their tails a-rollin'," was the word passed along the flanks of the herd. "No stops for any reason."

The cattle seemed to feel some stimulus from the night march, and footed faster and farther than they ever had before in the same period of time. The big moon swung over to mid-sky and yet the herd went forward; and the moon started down toward the horizon, as the dawn came to replace its silvern glow with the garish light of a new day.

Now the cattle wanted to turn aside, to nip at the sere grasses they passed, yet the same steady pressure of horse

and man's will power kept them on the move. The cattle resented this and tried to spread out, tried to break back, but still the stern purpose of the men of the Bar C outfit kept them on their way. Marvel came to the head of the herd on a horse, reporting that her bronchos were following Judith's wagon, and she had roped out a horse to ride up to the van of the procession to propose a plan:

"Let Judith and me cut around the herd with the wagons and get to that watering-hole first. We'll fill up our barrels, and get food cooked, and camp made," Marvel suggested.

"That will be all right; but I hate to let you girls away from the main outfit that way, and we need every man to keep these cattle going now. Later they'll smell that water and go fast enough—maybe too fast," Cricket explained his reluctance to have them go.

Marvel listened to this talk as if convinced, and rode away, after some airy persiflage with The Poco Kid, who was that day restored to her best graces, while Teaser Rines was correspondingly cast down.

Cricket now gave his whole attention to the cattle. The new day gained, and the sun came up, with a cool wind that helped to keep the cattle going well. They dropped their muzzles from time to time, for grass, but the call from the riders always was:

"Get along there, slowfoots; this ain't no time to eat."

Suddenly a change came over the cattle. The leaders set a faster pace; the swing packed closer in, and the drag took new heart as a puff of wind from a new direction caught them in the face. Now a lowing ran from point to drag, and the cattle put their heads up and marched like soldiers on parade.

"We ain't got to drive any more," Cricket rejoiced. "The main thing now is to keep them from rushing ahead in a stampede, and crowding into that half-dry lake like a lot of lame ducks, and getting bogged down. Let about all the pointers go, and we'll hold the rest back, if we can."

The riders cut into the point, shearing it off from the main herd, that tried to break forward. The pointers ran, tails up, over a last rise, on the other side of which, Cricket told the other Bar C people, was the half-dry lake.

"Any one seen the wagons lately?" he asked.

No one had.

"They're bobbing along back a way, I'll bet," Casey Jones said.

That satisfied Cricket for the time, as the cattle, held back, had begun a mill, and they had hard work breaking it up. Then the cattle tried another rush that took all the riders' skill and energy to head off. They heard the signal agreed upon—a single shot—telling that the first contingent of the herd had been watered, then another lot was let go over the rise. Now it was easier to hold the remnant, and yet they had to fight to keep them back. Cricket knew that the animals that had been watered would be driven out of the half-dry lake again, after a first wetting of throats, that would take from them the desire to crush the weaker in a mad rush for water. So, a few hundred at a time, the cattle were let go. And Cricket followed the last bunch over the rise to view the scattered cattle on the land—the last stragglers, snuffling at the roiled water and, at the far end of the half-dry lake, the two wagons.

"Oh, that's it; those girls cut around us, in spite of what I told Marvel," Cricket said to Jeed. "And they're over there, gettin' coffee ready for us."

"Well, I think that they've fallen asleep; there's no smoke of a campfire," Jeed said.

"That so? Well, they've earned a rest and we all have. These cattle will not need anything but this water to hold

them for a time. Let's all round up at the wagons, catch a nap, and forget our troubles. I'm goin' to stay right here for a day, at least, if we can find grass anywhere close by."

The Bar C men bunched and rode toward the wagons. As they drew closer in, the silence of the wagons seemed to strike each of them at once and they approached quietly.

"I'll shoot off my gun and scare them out of a year's growth," The Poco Kid proposed. His horses, left to graze as they could, he had driven in after the drag of the herd.

"No; we'll all let out a yell at the wave of Cricket's hand," Jeed suggested.

They drew in deep breaths; Cricket gave the signal; the long yell resounded; the cattle snorted and stamped.

There was no movement inside the wagons.

"Those gals are terrible sleepy-heads," Casey Jones spoke loudly, in the effort to bring them forth.

"I'm goin' to see what's keepin' them so still," and Cricket swung down.

"They're hidin' and tryin' to worry us," Teaser Rines said.

Cricket approached the chuck wagon, and peered in over the front of the wagon by climbing up on the whiffle trees.

"There's those wagon-bronchos, over at the top of that lake," said Casey Jones, pointing to the horses.

"Look here," Cricket called.

They all dismounted, and he came to them. They gathered about their young leader as he held out a sheet of paper:

"Found that on the seat, pinned fast to the cushion."

"Read it, Cricket."

"It's Judith's writing, all right."

"What does she say?"

"Listen, boys, does it sound right?"

And Cricket read this note to them:

"DEAR BAR C BOYS: Marvel and I are going out to hunt wood; will be back soon."

Jeed looked under the reach, where the empty rawhide swung.

"Waal, there wasn't any wood, that's a fact," he said.

"Oh, then it's all right; but those girls ought not to be off in the outlands alone this way," Cricket said. "Count those wagon-bronchos——"

"Two gone," Jeed verified Casey Jones' quick-glancing count.

"They rode off, then. They'll fetch wood back, dragging it at a rope's end, and send us for the rest," Boston said. "Let's see if we can't rustle some coffee for ourselves. I see some weeds that will maybe boil some coffee, if we can get enough of them."

They succeeded in making coffee, then waited anxiously. The sun wheeled up and over; noon came, but still no girls.

"I sure don't like this," Cricket spoke up decisively. "I'm going to have a look on a hoss. We've cut the ground around camp afoot for foreign sign and seen none. Of course, those cattle and those hosses have cut the ground pretty much up all around close in. Maybe if I circle, I'll hit their trail. They'd ought to be back now."

He left them, their bronzed faces lined with anxiety. The cattle and horses were quiet; two riders were with them as they drifted over the rolling land. Jeed sent two others out to keep them company. It was understood that the half dry lake was to be headquarters until further orders from Cricket.

Circling, wider and wider, Cricket leaned over in the saddle. They watched him anxiously as he went from sight into some roll of the land or came out on a ridge-back.

Suddenly he came spurring back toward them, quirt going hard.

"He's seen something important," Casey Jones shouted, springing into action at once. He flung himself on his horse and met Cricket half way in.

"I found strange hoof tracks; three

men came in close; they mounted out there a ways and they are leading two horses, as I can tell by the way those hosses dance off to one side, then come back into line again every little while. And I found this——" Cricket reported.

He held out a blue-bordered handkerchief that they often had seen Judith have.

"Those girls cut around the herd and got to that half-dry lake alone," Cricket told Casey Jones he had judged the sign. "They started off to find wood, were watched, and have been captured."

"Bar C will get those girls! That herd can go to the devil, for all I care till this is settled," Casey Jones exclaimed.

"You said a lot, then, old-timer. We hit that trail with all we've got, and we keep on it till we get what we're after," Cricket replied.

They came to the wagons in a swirl of dust and told the news. The men of Bar C spoke angrily, and would have rushed off in a body had not Cricket warned them that to do that would be to invite disaster.

"It may be another deal like we got into before, a plan to get us separated, so that they can pick us off piecemeal," Cricket reminded them. "And we've got to go slow or we'll be left without remounts and no grub. I'm not countin' the cattle as anything till we can get those girls back again—say, where's that Poco Kid?"

"Well, there's a dust cloud that may explain him," said Jeed, pointing to the small dust cloud away out on the track of the girls.

"He grabbed the first hoss, sneaked out till he could mount and get the start on us without us hearing him as we talked," Cricket said. "Now he's gone on alone. Well, we'll catch up—we've got to."

Two men were left with the herd, Old Boston and Jeed. The others grabbed what cold food was available and stuffed it into their saddle pockets and started after The Poco Kid, two or three at a time, as they could get going.

"Boston," Jeed said sadly; "it's up to us old-timers to keep the camp and fight. I don't think that we'll be here long without company."

"Nor I; remember what happened before," Boston replied.

"We've just got to drift with these cattle. Let those hosses go as they will. Hosses can take care of themselves; these cattle will just bog down and starve, unless some one shows them the way to grass."

Although Cricket and his friends pushed hard, they did not see The Poco Kid during those long, sun-smitten noon hours. The sign lay plain on the soil, easy to read—the three strange horses, the two horses being led and fighting on the bit at times as they were jerked viciously by the captors and always, off to one side, where he could not foul the sign for others following, the true and straight track of the horse of The Poco Kid.

"He's sure got grit in him," Teaser Rines spoke admiringly of his pal.

"If he hits them, he'll go down a-smokin'," Cricket said.

The trail took a circle; the sun was on their left hand.

The land rolled; the trail led down into a sharp dip, then out of it, across a flat, then into a miniature sink.

"Makes me think of Dog's Hole, only it's smaller," Cricket told the men who had not been in the fight against the Tawlton crowd.

Still the trail circled, for they came out of the sink on the same side they had entered, instead of crossing it.

Out on the level again, the sun was right at their left.

Cricket had them pull up on a ridge-top to blow their horses and tighten saddles.

"We've swung in a circle; that sign

is very fresh now. See, the dirt is still siftin' into those tracks," he said, pointing.

"They must be not far ahead; but why're they circling back toward camp?" Teaser wanted to know.

"We'll soon find out," Cricket said, and they swung onward again. They rushed down the ridge, up the next roll of land, down the next trough, over the ridge.

"Hark!" Cricket shouted, pulling his horse down to a dust-swirling stop that they all imitated.

Far out somewhere, clear, yet cut down in volume by distance, they could hear the booming of six-guns.

"Poco Kid's hit 'em," Cricket shouted. "Come on, boys, let's get into it——"

"In a heavy whirl of dust, the riders of the Bar C outfit started again; and, as they did so, they heard again the sound of rapid shooting.

To be continued in the next issue of WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE.

TEXAS-OKLAHOMA BOUNDARY STILL IN QUESTION

FOR a great many years, there have been disputes over the proper location of the boundary line between Texas and Oklahoma, and this dispute seems likely to be prolonged by recent decision of the United States Supreme Court. This decision provides that the disputed portion of the boundary between the two States, along the 100th meridian, must be located by a special commission. The territory in dispute runs north from the Red River along the eastern side of the Texas panhandle.

The court held that the present boundary, as surveyed and marked in 1859 by A. H. Jones and H. M. C. Brown, and retraced in 1860 by John H. Clark, does not accurately mark the line of the meridian on the ground. This boundary is favored by Oklahoma and the United States as the correct one, but is opposed by Texas as being too far west.

GIANT COUGAR KILLED IN RIO GRANDE VALLEY

A GIANT cougar weighing four hundred and eighty pounds and measuring seven feet, eight inches from tip to tip, was killed a few weeks ago in the brush between Harlingen and Rio Hondo, Texas, by a party of hunters headed by C. W. Pierce and his hounds. The cougar put up a desperate fight before he succumbed to the shot from a .38-caliber pistol fired by a soldier in the party named Johnson. In the battle, the cougar knocked over two of the dogs, almost killing them with one stroke of his powerful paw. After being shot, he ran several hundred yards, with the dogs in hot pursuit, before dropping dead. The bullet that finished the cougar was fired by Johnson as the animal crouched in the fork of a tree ready to spring.

Desert Doomed

By Albert William Stone

Author of "The Rosa Belle Round-up," etc.

THE few strangers who ever came to Muledeer and asked questions about old "Longhair" Skaggs, the desert rat, always got the same answer:

"The desert's got him."

It wasn't hard to believe. The stranger from the East—that he was a tenderfoot was loudly advertised by his khaki outfit—had been hanging around town for three days before Longhair blew in. At sight of the old fellow the tenderfoot began to show great interest.

"Who is he?" he asked of Bill Jordan, the storekeeper.

"Name's Skaggs," Bill Jordan answered. "Called 'Longhair' fer short. Lives in a shack twenty-two miles out in the Mojave, on the Mesquite road. Come here thirty-five years ago, wearin' that same long-tailed coat he's got on this minnit. It used to be black."

The coat was certainly anything but black now. It was a dull green and incredibly ancient in appearance. Its skirts flapped around the old man's twisted legs like a flag at half-mast in falling weather. Longhair's trousers were baggy and came only part way to his feet, ending about halfway the length of his cowhide boots. His hair was tinged with green, too, and hung to his bent shoulders. He wore a battered hat that had once, doubtless, been black. Now it was a rusty brown, and was full of ragged holes. He was all of six feet three inches tall.

The desert rat bought some tobacco and matches, a few pounds of flour and coffee, a can of salt, a small sack of beans and a side of bacon. He paid for his purchases with money he laboriously extracted from an old wallet equipped with leather strings. Then he shuffled out, carrying the things he had bought, to load them on the back of the burro he had left standing in front of the store. The stranger continued to eye him until he had gone from sight down Muledeer's main street, bound for the

desert road beyond. Then he turned to Bill Jordan for further elucidation.

"He talks like a pretty well educated man," he observed.

Bill wagged his bald head.

"He's shore a queer old coot," he said. "Prospects some, but don't ever bring in any gold dust or nuggets to pay fer what he gits. Looky here."

He tossed a greenback down on the counter for the stranger's inspection.

"That's an old greenback. What's the date on it?" he asked.

The stranger picked up the bill and examined it.

"Eighteen eighty-eight," he replied after a moment. Bill Jordan chuckled.

"He always pays with old greenbacks," he declared. "Must have brought considerable paper money with him when he come. Never brings in any gold, quartz or nuggets. Never any dust. Been prospectin' out in the old Mojave thirty-five years, too."

The stranger handed the bill back without comment. The storekeeper went on:

"He don't talk much, Longhair don't, but he shore knows how to use language when he gits started. I reckon he went to college once. He's got a lotta books out there in his shack, with high soundin' names on 'em."

"He must have found some gold in all these years, don't you think?" the stranger asked.

"Why, I reckon he must have." The storekeeper eyed the other over his spectacles with sudden suspicion. Then, quite unaccountably, he became as noncommunicative as he had been loquacious. In the end the stranger desisted from further inquiries and went outside.

"Wisht I could keep my fool mouth shut!" Bill Jordan muttered into his mustache. "Don't like the way that gent acts. Too all-fired curious, he is."

The next morning the storekeeper invited "Fill-em-up" Dodd, the blacksmith, to the rear of the store. Fill-em-up was about to start across the Mojave on a matter of business. He would take the Mesquite road. The storekeeper thrust a folded paper in his hand.

"Give that to Longhair Skaggs, if he's to home," he directed in a hoarse whisper. "If he ain't, shove it under his door—'way under. An' don't tell nobody; savvy?"

The blacksmith promised and subsequently went his way across the desert. Several hours later—travel is perforce slow in the desert in the daytime—he handed Longhair Skaggs the folded paper. The old man adjusted his glasses and read the storekeeper's scrawl:

> A tenderfoot that's been hanging around Muledeer seems all-fired interested in you. Thought you might like to know it.
>
> JORDAN.

He read it a second time and nodded.

"I thank you," he said in a queerly formal way. "I am about to eat something. Won't you join me?"

"Much obliged," Fill-'em-up said. "Don't care if I do."

So he ate heartily of the old man's simple provender, and then went his way. After his departure Longhair read the note again, pursing his lips. That night, after supper, he sat under his shade tree—the only tree in twenty miles—and gravely regarded the starry sky. Presently, after the way of desert men, he began to talk. There were none to hear save the sidewinders, the road runners, the lizards, the prairie owls and other denizens of the Mojave.

"Thirty-five years of it!" he was muttering. His voice was deep, far down in his hairy throat. "Thirty-five years of separation from my kind, in this place." He waved his hand, as if indicating his meaning to a listener. "It seems to me that I have earned the right of isolation, in that time."

And then he uttered an oath. It was not exactly blasphemous, coming from him. But it was pregnant with hate. He cursed the Mojave from the dawn of its history up to the present velvety night. He cursed its spiny vegetation, its reptile and animal life, its sudden storms, its withering heat, its bare mountains. He cursed the little shack that gave him shelter. He even cursed the tree overhead. His profanity was both lurid and methodical.

"Who dares to say that I have not expiated my crime?" he demanded, shaking his fist at the night. He shook it in the direction of Muledeer. "Must I go on forever, like this? Why can't they leave me alone?"

It was three days before the stranger was able to hire a horse to take him out into the desert. He arrived at the shack at noon. The plank door was closed and padlocked on the outside, and the two windows were tightly shuttered. A spring a short distance from the back door bubbled briskly out of the ground, and a trim little garden attested its value to the owner. But there was no one at home. Longhair had probably departed upon one of his periodical prospecting trips—the storekeeper had warned the stranger that such might be the case.

A green-and-yellow lizard was sunning itself on the rough window sill, and a sidewinder rattlesnake made an ungainly retreat across the hard sand of the dooryard as the stranger surveyed the scene. Otherwise the stillness was that of the grave. No hint of a breeze stirred the drooping leaves of the tree overhead. The heat was searing, sizzling.

In the end he returned to Muledeer. Bill Jordan grinned broadly into his mustache.

"Like as not he's gone up into the Salt Springs country," he said. "Be gone two or three months, maybe. Queer old coot. Seems to like to git plumb away from everybody."

Now that Longhair was definitely out of the way, the storekeeper thawed noticeably. It appeared that he knew the desert rat as well as any one, having already been keeping store at Muledeer when the other appeared on the scene thirty-five years before.

Eying the tenderfoot furtively, he told of the time, eight years previous, when a road agent tried to hold up the old prospector, in the latter's shack. That the desert rat kept some gold secreted in the place was generally accepted, since he certainly must have found some of the precious mineral in his years of searching, and it was equally certain that he had spent none of it in that time.

The road agent thought to help himself to the hoarded wealth, and covered the old man with a brace of .45s, ordering him to throw up his hands.

But Longhair shot him through the body, instead, killing him instantly. How he did it was a mystery, as the road agent was notoriously expert with a gun. Some folks said that Longhair carried a pair of long-barreled weapons in the tails of his coat, ready for emergencies. But how he had succeeded in getting them into action from such a position baffled everybody who discussed or thought about it; and Longhair never told.

Anyhow, the bandit was dead. His slayer loaded the body unceremoniously on a burro and took it to Muledeer, where he delivered it up to Nate Beeson, who was both undertaker and coroner. Nate held an inquest, at which a jury of Muledeer citizens decided that the deceased desperado had come to his death through premeditated accident. They buried him in a corner of the cemetery, deep in the sand, and covered the grave with stones. Longhair Skaggs went back to his shack in the desert.

"It's purty plain that Longhair's plumb fast on the draw," observed the storekeeper at the conclusion of his tale. "He never bothers nobody, an' nobody ever bothers him. When a gent demonstrates that he kin shoot straight from his coat tails, there ain't many folks gonna dispute him none. Longhair's a good man to leave alone, if you ask *me*."

The tenderfoot, for all he was so palpably new to the West and its ways, did not look exactly like a greenhorn. There was a suggestion of power about him. He was somewhere in the thirties, with lines about his mouth that bespoke determination. He had gray eyes and deliberation of movement, while he casually carried a revolver in a holster suspended from his belt.

"Seems to be a man who prefers to be alone," he observed casually at the conclusion of Bill Jordan's recital.

"That's it. Tends to his own business, an' 'lows that other folks kin tend to theirs," Bill Jordan remarked.

"I see," said the stranger.

The next morning he boarded the stage and departed from Muledeer, apparently satisfied to leave that desert metropolis to its fate. The storekeeper chuckled as he followed the cloud of dust with his eyes.

"Jest curious, I reckon," he said to himself. "But you can't always tell. Thirty-five years is a long time, but—a gent's business is his own, seems to me. Anyhow, I'm bettin' we don't see that hombre no more."

For three weeks Longhair Skaggs remained away from his shack, presumably looking for color in the Salt Springs country to the north of the Mesquite road. Whether he found any or not is immaterial to this history. Suffice it to say that at the end of that time he once more headed toward the only home that he had known for a third of a century, driving his two burros before him, and occasionally sweeping the long stretch of Mesquite road with the old-fashioned telescope that he always carried swung across his left shoulder.

There was no sign of life in or around the shack. Neither could he detect any on the snakelike road that stretched away east and west. He approached nearer, and saw that the garden, so green and thriving three weeks before, had been blasted by the heat. He was thirsty, and so were the burros. The little animals quickened their pace as they neared the little spring that always bubbled energetically below the house.

The tree drooped in the blaze of sunshine, its leaves covered with white dust. The padlock was on the door, just as the owner had left it. A big rock that reared itself sharply out of the sand stood a hundred yards away, casting a distinct shadow across a narrow wash. The old man pushed the burros away as he knelt stiffly before the spring and cooled his throat with the sweet water. Then he left the animals nosing each other unceremoniously as they fought for first chance at the spring, while he unlocked the padlock and threw open the door.

Inside he found things as he had left them—the carefully scrubbed pine table in the middle of the plank floor, which was likewise scrupulously clean; the shelves against the wall with their tin and granite ware, including the coffeepot; the bunk on the other side, neatly made up; the homemade bookcase in the corner, filled with volumes whose gilt titles were dimmed with age; the lamp on the table, its chimney covered with a film of dust; the little cook stove in the corner opposite that occupied by the bookcase, with kindling already split and piled up behind it. Longhair prepared kindling from the tough tree yucca and other desert vegetation.

He strode across the floor and threw

open one of the windows, releasing the plank shutter. He repeated the operation with the other window, directly opposite. The hot desert air began to circulate through the room, driving out the "dead" atmosphere that had permeated it. Outside he could hear the burros snorting and blowing the water of the spring, after the wasteful manner of animals whose thirst has been slaked.

It was supper time, and the old man went out to recover some of his food supplies from the back of one of the burros. He paused on the threshold, staring from under his thick eyebrows. The evening breeze, which always came up about this time, stirred the greenish-gray beard that swept his chest.

"I beg your pardon."

A thick-set man was standing under the tree, smiling. He was a man in his middle thirties, apparently, with lines around his mouth and gray eyes under level brows. He was clad in khaki, and a gun protruded from a holster that hung suspended from his belt. His right hand was not very far from the butt.

"I wonder if you'd just as soon give me shelter for the night? I'm rather—tired of sleeping out, you see," he explained.

A burro stood close to the man, loaded with a pack. Longhair's coat was inside the shack, hanging on a peg. He always took it off when he prepared a meal. He wore no weapon.

"Where do you come from?" he inquired at length, in curiously measured accents.

"From Needles," the other replied promptly.

"But before that? Where is your home?" the old man pursued.

It was a strange question under the circumstances. The man in khaki hesitated.

"I am from the East," he said after a pause. Then he laughed apologetically. "I suppose that is evident, though."

"It is," said Longhair deliberately. "The town of Muledeer, if that is where you are going, is twenty miles farther on. You can't miss it. There will be a moon to-night."

There was no misunderstanding that. The old prospector was refusing hospitality to the stranger, with the sun sinking blazingly behind the rim of bare mountains to the west, and the evening breeze already tingeing the superheated atmosphere with the inevitable chill of a desert night. The man under the tree had been smiling, but now the smile faded.

"Please get me right," he said. "I'm not asking for charity. I can pay my way——"

"I am not running a hotel," Longhair interrupted.

The lines around the stranger's mouth deepened.

"I have heard about you," he said slowly. "You never care for company. You've lived out here in this desert thirty-five years. You killed a man eight years ago because he wanted to rob you. Well, I'm not a thief. You haven't got anything that I want, except a roof and a floor to sleep on. I'm not here to harm you, and it seems to me——"

He paused, while the old man's stare held him. There was a curious mixture of malevolence and curiosity in Longhair's expression. If his fingers itched for the feel of the guns that reposed in the tails of his coat, hanging inside, he gave no sign.

"If I don't care for company," he said, "that is my business, isn't it? And if I shot a man for trying to rob me, that was my business also. You can make the distance to Muledeer in a few hours, by moonlight. There is no good reason why you should stay here, that I can see. Hence——"

He turned as though about to enter

the shack. If the move was a tentative one, it brought speedy results. The stranger's gun fairly leaped out of its holster and was leveled at the tall form of the prospector before he could turn halfway around. The move was executed with the mechanical precision characteristic of men who are habitual users of firearms.

"No, you don't! Stay right where you are. I've heard all about those guns you carry in your coat tails," he said.

Longhair turned back slowly. He had suddenly become a very old man. When he spoke his voice was a deep tremolo.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"It doesn't make so much difference who I am, as it does that I come from Bridgeport, Connecticut," the man with the gun answered. "The town where a man named Jeremiah Shortridge lived a good many years ago. Ever hear of Jeremiah Shortridge?"

The bent shoulders of Longhair Skaggs went still lower, and his arms, which had been crooked aggressively before him, hung inert. His big hands were open. His bearded chin fell on his breast.

"I suppose that you're an officer of the law?" he asked.

"I am," was the answer.

"And you've come out here looking for—Jeremiah Shortridge?" Longhair asked.

"That's what I'm here for," the other replied.

"And you think that I'm—I'm Jeremiah Shortridge?"

The stranger laughed. He seemed curiously prone to laughter, considering.

"I didn't say so," he retorted. "I merely said I come from a place where he used to live a good many years ago." He lowered the gun and spoke conversationally. "Are you, by any chance, Jeremiah Shortridge?"

But if he hoped to surprise the other into an admission of identity he was doomed to disappointment. Longhair Skaggs had lived in the desert a long time, and was an old man. If he had evaded the law all those years, it was conceivable that he would not submit to it without a struggle. Sudden caution descended upon him, and he raised his head, so thickly crowned with greenish-white hair. His old eyes held a strangely defiant light.

"You took advantage of me," he accused. "You hid behind that rock, didn't you?" The stranger nodded. "And now you've been trying to get the advantage over me by appealing to my sense of hospitality. Is that the way you learn to do, back in—Bridgeport, Connecticut?"

"I don't want to harm you, sir," the man in khaki denied quickly. "That's the last thing I'd think of doing, Mr.—Skaggs. But your reputation for quick and accurate shooting is too good. If you're Jeremiah Shortridge, I might want to talk to you, you see; and if I let you get at your guns, I might not have the chance."

"And if I'm not Jeremiah Shortridge?" questioned the other.

"I'd like to have a talk with you anyway," said the stranger.

The old man considered, while craft crept into his eyes so effectually screened by the shaggy white brows. He would make no admissions to this determined stranger while the latter had the drop on him, at any rate. And perhaps later on——

"All right," he said suddenly. "You may stay here to-night if you desire, and we'll talk."

"That's better," said the other, replacing his revolver in his pocket. He did not even pledge Longhair to a parole, for there was that in the old desert rat's dignified carriage that precluded the necessity for such a measure. He helped his host to unload the

burros, and to prepare the simple meal. The appetizing fragrance of frying bacon filled the air of the cabin. When supper was ready they sat down at opposite sides of the pine table.

"This smells good!" the guest declared enthusiastically. "That breeze is certainly cool, too. The way you're fixed up here, Mr. Skaggs, I don't blame you for loving the desert as they say you do."

The old man looked at him.

"I don't love the desert," he said. "It is the worst place in creation, sir. It is the——"

He ended his denunciation with a string of profane epithets that fairly crackled. Then, suddenly, he drew a long breath and bowed his head, mumbling some words of grace. The man in khaki stared at the bowed head at first in frank astonishment; then, curiously, his eyes were filmed over with something that might have been emotion.

"Do you do this—sort of thing—often?" he asked when the green-white head was raised again.

"I thank God for His care several times a day," Longhair said quietly. "Now, sir, I trust that you will find the food to your liking."

They fell to and began eating. If Longhair was in the least troubled at the probable nature of the conversation to come after the meal his trepidation was not reflected in his appetite. In fact an observer might have classed his appetite with that so often exhibited by condemned criminals just before they start on the death march for the scaffold.

The dishes had been washed and put in their places and the shack tidied before the host acknowledged readiness to take up the business in hand. Before repairing to the shelter of the tree outside, the leaves of which were now rustling in the steady night breeze that was blowing, the old man took down his green Prince Albert coat that had once been black, and rummaged in the tail pockets. His guest made no move as the long-barreled pistols came out. The prospector deposited them carefully on the pine table and proceeded to don the coat.

"Have to wear it of nights," he explained. "That's the only good thing about the desert—it gets cool of nights. Shall we go outside, sir?"

Under the tree they smoked. Longhair puffed at an ancient pipe, the stranger smoked a black cigar. The glow of their respective "smokes" vied with the stars. The horizon to the east was showing a faint film of silver, presaging the forthcoming advent of the desert moon.

"How long have you been looking for—Jeremiah Shortridge?" the old man finally asked.

The stranger settled back in his homemade chair.

"A long time," he answered slowly. "A very long time, in fact. But it is only in the last four months that I have taken up the search in earnest. Something happened, you see——"

He did not finish the sentence. Longhair nodded in the darkness.

"I got word from a friend of mine in Muledeer, three weeks ago, that you were looking for—that you were asking about *me*," he said.

The stranger chuckled. "Your friend, the storekeeper, thought that he had thrown me off the track, I guess. He's a good friend of yours, Mr.—Skaggs. I left on the stage, but came back by way of Needles, as you see. I knew you wouldn't stay out in the desert forever."

"Jordan is all right," assented Longhair. "What makes you think that—Jeremiah Shortridge may be in this part of the country? How do you know that he isn't dead?"

"I have been tracing him," explained

the other. His casual tone did not betray anything but tacit acceptance of the old man's implication that he was not Jeremiah Shortridge. "One blind alley after another. Thirty-five years is a long time, but I've had some experience in trailing. Dabbled in politics quite a bit, back in Bridgeport, and got myself elected sheriff of the county, once."

"But how do you know that he isn't dead?" persisted the prospector. "As you say, thirty-five years is a long time."

"I didn't know. But I wanted to find out. That's why I'm here. I guessed that he would seek out some place where few other people were apt to come. The desert country seems to me to be such a place. Not overpopulated. Folks don't care much for it, I guess," the stranger continued.

He twisted himself around in his chair.

"Let's get down on the right basis," he said suddenly. "Are you Jeremiah Shortridge?"

"Tell me your name, first," the old man said.

"My name is—Smith," replied the other.

"And my name is Skaggs."

The man who called himself Smith laughed. Longhair settled to a more comfortable position.

"But," he added, "I think that I know something about this Jeremiah Shortridge. I used to live near Bridgeport, a good many years ago. This Shortridge was a manufacturer, wasn't he? Something in steel."

"Steel," assented the guest, nodding in the darkness.

"A pretty successful young man, as success went in those days." The voice of the old man had grown dreamy. "But unfortunate in his marriage, if I recollect right. He didn't get along very well with his wife."

"I've heard something of the kind."

Longhair drew a long breath. "Young man," he said, "I'll tell you the story of Jeremiah Shortridge, as I knew it. I take it that you're hardly more than a young man, so you wouldn't know anything about it save by hearsay. And hearsay evidence is no good in a court of law."

There was no answer. Longhair puffed at his pipe and went on in a curious monotone, as though rehearsing a story he had rehearsed many times before.

"His wife was a good woman, as women go. But a great deal of a shrew. Shortridge was a thoughtful young man, given to long courses of study in matters relating to his business. He hadn't time for foolishness. He was all business, for he wanted to make a great success of his life.

"His wife, on the other hand, loved pleasure. She wanted to go to balls and the like. She was a featherbrain—a good woman, you understand, but featherbrained. And she had a temper. She scolded without cessation, until she drove Shortridge pretty nearly crazy.

"One night things came to a climax. She was scolding at him in the sitting room of their home. Things had gone from bad to worse. For some reason or other she had been getting more and more angry. The climax came when she picked up a statuette—it was a Mendelssohn, I think—and threw it at me. It struck me full on the head, dazing me and making me temporarily insane with fury."

"And you hit her back?" interjected the other.

"Please don't interrupt," the old man commanded, somewhat testily. "I haven't said that I was Shortridge, have I?"

"Didn't you? Well, go on," the other said.

"As I say, the blow rendered him temporarily insane with rage," Long-

hair continued. "He picked up the statuette and poised it for a throw. Whether he would have thrown it at her or not I do not know. Nobody knows. I—he was crazy enough with pain and fury to have done almost anything.

"But as it happened, he didn't. At the instant he got his bearings, a man came into the room. It was her brother. Naturally he would take up the cudgel in his sister's behalf. Realization of the fact came to me on the instant and, without pausing, I hurled the statuette straight at him. I saw him go down under the crushing blow—for I was a strong man in those days—what am I saying?"

"Shortridge threw the statuette at his wife's brother," the listener prompted.

"That is right," the old man assented. "He threw it with all his might, and he was a strong man. When he came more fully to his senses there lay his wife's brother on the floor, dead. And his sister was kneeling down by the body, screaming and crying. It was—awful!"

Old Longhair had buried his face in his hands. Presently he lifted it and faced the other in the gloom under the tree. The moon was rising now, full-orbed and radiant.

"I guess that there's no use trying to get away from it any longer," he said dully. "I left the house and took a train for the West. I knew that my wife would be well provided for, as our bank account was a joint one, and my property was in her name also. I had drawn a considerable sum of money from the bank that day, as it happened, and that I took with me on my flight. I came straight to the desert, and here I have remained ever since. Thirty-five years!"

"It's a long time," the other said, a queer huskiness in his voice.

"I suppose that my wife is dead?" the old man asked.

"Two years ago," nodded the other. "She tried to find you, of course, but you had disappeared."

"She wanted to find me so that I could be hanged for killing her brother, of course," Longhair declared bitterly. "It was really an accident, but she would have sworn my life away. She hated me."

"No," denied his guest quickly. "She never hated you. She tried to find you to tell you that everything was all right. There—there was a reason why she acted toward you as she did. A good reason."

A pause ensued. "A good reason?" repeated the old man presently. "A—good reason?"

The man dressed in khaki suddenly stood up.

"Mr. Skaggs," he said, suddenly brisk, "you know that I am here after you, don't you? I've hunted you a long time, and I want to take you back home with me. I want your promise to go back with me."

"Promise?" The old man's puzzlement deepened. "Why, you're an officer, aren't you? And you've trailed me, after thirty-five years. The statute of limitations never runs on the crime of—murder. I know that much about law. And I've lived thirty-five years of hell on earth, here in this desert. I've had enough. Of course I'll go back——"

"Then you admit that you're Jeremiah Shortridge?"

The silence that followed the question was as profound as it ever gets on the desert. The moon was swinging full over the eastern horizon by this time, and the velvet heavens were studded thickly with stars that attain a greater brilliancy in this latitude than anywhere else. The lamp had been left burning in the shack, casting a yellow glow through door and windows and staining the hard sand of the ground. The rustle of the leaves overhead was

soft and continuous. Vague shadows were already beginning to take shape all around.

"Yes, I am Jeremiah Shortridge," the old man said finally. Then, getting stiffly to his feet, he laughed—a shrill cackle that came strangely from his hairy throat. He flung his arms wildly aloft, his bearded profile making a bas-relief against the disk of the moon. "Jeremiah Shortridge, the wife deserter, the murderer, the poor fool who thought that he could escape the consequences of his sin by hiding in the desert! The desert——"

He cursed it in sudden shrieks, shaking his fist at its shadows. The burros lifted their heads to listen, and the pack rats paused in their incessant squeaking. Only the rustling of the leaves overhead formed a symphonic background for the frenzied profanity. The man called Smith was already standing, and he held his peace while the old man, thirty-five years a fugitive, rid his soul of the hate that had seethed within him so long.

After a time the curses died away, and the old man stood gazing at the eastern horizon. The burros resumed their cropping of the grass. Presently the bearded figure turned, and the voice of the desert rat was once more deep and dignified.

"I am your prisoner, Sheriff Smith," he said pleasantly. "And I only wish that you had arrived a good while ago. You would have saved me some of this——"

He waved his hand at the surrounding bleakness.

But the other man only smiled quietly.

"No, you are not my prisoner," he said. "You are my father."

"Your——" the old man began.

"I told you that there was a good reason why your wife—my mother—acted as she did. I was born five months after you went away."

"But——"

"And my uncle, her brother, put in years trying to learn your whereabouts. They both advertised in the papers. They——"

"Her brother?" The old man had seized the other by the arm. "Her—brother? You mean——"

"You didn't kill him," his son informed him. "You just knocked him unconscious. And you've buried yourself thirty-five years in the desert for nothing."

But old Longhair Skaggs, formerly Jeremiah Shortridge, didn't go back East after all. He had been away too long. And when he had explained this to his son, whose Christian name was also Jeremiah, the latter released him from his promise. They were sitting under the tree, with the evening breeze beginning to rustle the leaves overhead, and the sun sinking out of sight behind the line of bare, brown desert mountains.

"Now that the desert is no longer a prison house to me," the old man said, "I find that I don't hate it any more. It has become suddenly beautiful. Did you ever see anything to match that sunset, for instance?"

For the desert is, after all, a kindly mistress to those who can see its beauty. And the desert had finally "got" Longhair!

Trouble on the Rattletrap

By John H. Hamlin

Author of "Cowboy Luck," etc.

CHAPTER I.

A JOB FOR A TWO-GUN MAN.

A BULLET through the heart sent the great, tawny beast leaping high into the air. It came down, thrashing in its death struggle, alongside the body of the young calf upon which it had been feasting. Lee Bridges, holding his smoking rifle in readiness for another shot, slipped through the thicket of young pines, tingling with elation over his successful stalking of the predatory mountain lion.

"Why—er—what's this?" There was consternation in the stuttered syllables the moment that he gained an unobstructed view of the quivering creature. "N-not a catamount!" The cowboy suddenly leaned forward, his eyes glued upon the arched and muscular neck of the marauding beast.

"A collar!" Lee stepped nearer, a bit cautious as to how he approached those wickedly curled lips that revealed sharp fangs. He studied the narrow leathern strap encircling the animal's neck. "And a brass plate on it! Now, don't that beat everything!" he exclaimed.

Before the beast's muscles had ceased twitching, Lee knelt beside the tawny body and examined the collar.

"Return to Kala Dale!" He read the inscription on the name plate aloud once, twice, and three times. Then he sat upon the soft pine needles, and the exultation over his kill turned to remorse.

"Went and killed some girl's pet dog! Ain't that the limit?" He eyed the powerful animal. "Don't seem like no girl's pet—a critter that prowls round killin' yearlin' calves. Who is this Kala Dale anyhow? Never heard tell of her in this valley."

Lee shook his head as he tried to conjure up a picture of a girl romping over the hills with the ferocious brute tagging at her heels. Finally he removed

the collar and saw that it was a home-made affair—the letters crudely scratched upon it, probably with a horseshoe nail.

"Return to Kala Dale!" The words persisted in buzzing through Lee's brain until they reacted strongly upon his imagination. "Why, I reckon I'll just naturally have to do something to square up for shootin' your pet, Kala Dale. Must be some shakes different from an ordinary girl that likes a lap dog," Lee remarked as he tucked the collar into his pouched shirt front and buttoned it securely in place, hopped on his snorting pony which he had picketed just over the adjoining ridge, and struck into the dim cattle trails leading back to the "Buckjump Ranch."

He said nothing about shooting the calf-killing dog, and even less about the collar concealed in the bosom of his flannel shirt. The other punchers would have kidded him unmercifully for mistaking that huge, tawny mastiff for a catamount. Lee knew, though, that it was this same mastiff which had been playing havoc with the young stock on the Buckjump range. Lee was a wise man in some respects; but he couldn't erase from his mind the picture of this girl, Kala Dale, wandering over the mountain trails, accompanied by such a ferocious-looking beast. He hadn't been born and reared in this particular section of the cattle country, so didn't know the history of the ranchers living in Willow Creek Valley and its tributaries. He made subtle inquiries about the name of Dale, but no one could give him any information.

It wasn't until ten days after he had killed the big mastiff that Lee got an actual clew about the owner from Nora Willis, the reigning belle of Willow Creek Valley. He'd gone to a dance held in the schoolhouse, and the moment that he caught a glimpse of Nora he had an idea that she might shed some light upon the baffling subject.

So he managed to get a dance with her early in the evening, and, after paying her a goodly string of compliments, casually inquired:

"Say, Nora, did you ever hear of a girl named Kala Dale?"

"Kala Dale?" Nora asked, lifting her dark, sparkling eyes. And Lee, eagerly on the alert, thought that he detected a far-away expression flit over her face.

"Yeah," and since Lee didn't wish to confess just why he was interested, he promptly manufactured a fib. "I met up with a cowboy down in Susanville who asked me to look her up and say hello for him," he said.

"Oh," murmured Nora, "I thought that maybe it was *you* who wanted to say hello to her!" She flashed him a smile and continued, "I used to know Kala, but I haven't seen or heard from her in ages."

"She ain't here no more, you mean?" Lee asked in evident disappointment.

"Kala never did live in this valley. I knew her when I went to school at Toptown," Nora replied.

"She lives in Toptown, you mean?" questioned the impatient Lee.

"I couldn't say for sure, Lee. My, but Kala was a pretty thing—snapping black eyes, sort of like a gypsy, with red ribbons plaited in her dusky braids. She rode the wildest mustangs to school, and even the best boy riders were afraid of them. And spunky—good gracious, Lee, well, do I remember the time a couple of hateful girls accused Kala of cheating in examinations. They were jealous of her, because she was so pretty and lively. But she drove those girls into a corner of the schoolroom and threatened to whip them with her quirt, if they didn't take back what they'd said. The teacher popped in just then and sided with the girls. She tried to make Kala apologize, but Kala claimed that she hadn't cheated and refused to apologize. I knew that she didn't cheat, Lee—she

wasn't that kind of a girl. But the teacher was a stubborn old thing and insisted, so Kala jumped away from her, gave those horrid girls a quick slashing with her quirt and stalked out of the room, proud and defiant as a little princess. She never came back, and we certainly missed her. Dad moved down here shortly afterward, and that was the last time that I ever saw Kala Dale," Nora concluded.

"You don't know where she is—what became of her?" demanded Lee.

"Why, I believe that her father owns a ranch somewhere north of Toptown," Nora answered with a swift, searching glance at Lee. "Seems to me that you're terribly keen about locating Kala—just for some other man, Lee."

"Er-r, why, sure I am," he blustered, and heaved a sigh of relief when the music stopped. "Thanks, Nora. That cowboy'll be plumb tickled to hear what you've told me about Kala Dale." Lee escorted Nora to her seat and slipped out of the schoolhouse. He mounted his pony and rode dreamily back to the Buckjump.

Directly after breakfast next morning, Lee called for his time. It did him good to hear the protests of the big boss and the lamentations of his fellow cowboys. But he said that he was called north and had to go. And an hour later he was bound for that ranch somewhere north of Toptown, the brass-plated collar, bearing the name of Kala Dale, tucked snugly inside the front of his flannel shirt.

He reached the little cow town the second day out from the Buckjump Ranch. After putting up his pony at Blow's Livery, Feed and Sale Stable, he prowled down the dusty main street of Toptown. He drifted into the "Sassy Jane Chophouse" and ordered a large meal. Then he proceeded to give the town the once-over and eventually wound up at the Sagehen Hotel.

When he clanked through the swinging doors which gave directly into the barroom, a man glanced up from the pink sport sheet of a newspaper and nodded. Lee planted a boot on the railing and ordered a tall glass of ginger ale.

"This cow town looks good to me. Know of any outfit needin' a good cow hand?" he asked of the bartender.

"Offn what range do you come, cowboy?" the barkeeper asked, swabbing a towel over the bar and clinking Lee's change on the cleaned boards.

"From Willow Creek. Rode range for the Buckjump Ranch. Know 'Tige' Northrup?" Lee questioned.

"Sure, he's copped off first money in the round-ups here. They claim he's a slick rider," the bartender replied.

"He's all of that," Lee remarked, pushing his sombrero off his forehead. "What's some of the outfits north o' town where they'd likely be shy a puncher?"

"Why north of town?" The barkeeper scrutinized Lee closely—an inquisitive smirk wrinkling his fat, red cheeks.

"Oh, just a hankerin' for them mountains to the north, which same I can't say about them sage flats south and west of here," was Lee's plausible explanation.

"Huh," sniffed the barkeeper, then he lowered his voice confidentially. "Waal, spot them two hombres settin' in that thar corner?"

Lee slowly revolved and looked in the direction indicated. Beyond the three pool tables, and in a secluded nook, he saw two men seated at a small card table. The man facing the bar was arguing with a slouching, gray-haired ancient who seemed half asleep.

"The big man's 'Jib' Stoney. He's wantin' a two-gun man to tend the ditch line he's shovin' through to irrigate them sage flats of his."

"Guess I ain't interested," said Lee, suddenly aware that Jib Stoney had

focused his hawklike eyes full upon him. Lee turned to the barkeeper: "Them sage flats ain't in the mountains north of this here town; and in the second place, I don't know as I blame the old-timers for buckin' against irrigating ditches, which mean more fences for this range country."

"Waal, this ditch line taps the head waters of Rattletrap Creek and your beat'd be mostly round Rattletrap Valley which is north o' here all right," the bartender remarked.

"Rattletrap Valley." Lee repeated the name mechanically. "What's up there?"

"Used to be all sage and greasewood, but it's a right purty spot in the mountains since Old Hike took it over. Jib figgers to annex it for a reservoir, but Old Hike won't sell to him. Jib's got him over a bar'l now, though," the man replied.

"How come?" Lee asked.

"He's talked 'Sandy' Crapes into sellin' out his water rights, which allows Jib to start his ditch up above Rattletrap Valley. That's Jib Stoney—allus gits what he goes after one way or t'other. He'd pay you fat wages, cowboy—that is if you ain't skeered to tackle a two-gun man job." The barkeeper grinned suggestively, and Lee found himself resenting the intimation that he was really afraid of running any risks.

"Who's the old duffer Jib's put to sleep?" he asked.

"Sandy Crapes. Some character, that man. Used to be a mule-skinner, haulin' freight over these mountain roads. Them what knows say that he was a whiz in his day. Handled ten mules easy as pie with jest a jerk line and a whip, which he could pop like it was a pair o' six-guns both barkin' to once." The barkeeper's eyes shifted, then lit up with a deferential expression and he bobbed his head and welcomed Jib Stoney, who had arisen from the corner table and padded noiselessly across to the bar.

"Same dope, Jib?" Then, without waiting for an answer, the barkeeper stooped and juggled a quart bottle from beneath the counter, filled a glass as though he were performing a special ceremony, and tendered it to Stoney.

Stoney picked up the glass, raised it off the bar, then put it down again and gave a slight twist of his head—first to the man behind the bar, then to Lee.

Lee met the searching stare of cold black eyes. The pupil and iris seemed united in strange, bottomless pools that gave off no spark of warmth. The man's nose was prominent as a hawk's beak. Virility and determination showed in the lines which ran from the corner of his eyes straight down his cheeks. He might have been thirty years old, and yet again a splendidly preserved fifty. Lee found himself drinking with Jib Stoney almost without realizing that he had accepted a wordless invitation.

Stoney drained his glass in a single gulp, tossed a coin on the bar, and ignored the bartender as he spoke to Lee Bridges.

"How about it?"

"I don't get you," Lee replied, feeling that there was something uncanny in the man's nature. He knew what Stoney was driving at, but had never been offered a job in this manner before.

"Yes, you do," he said. "I ain't askin' a lot of fool questions." A pause, as though he wanted Lee to understand that he couldn't be bothered with answering questions, either. Then he named a figure which was twenty dollars more than Lee had been drawing at the Buckjump, and continued: "Take it or leave it, but I sized you up while Sam here was gassin' with you. Say the word and I'll sign you for the job this very minute."

Lee hesitated. The man's strange,

black eyes bored into him. It was equivalent to a dare—a veiled testing of Lee's courage. The cowboy's spirit of adventure rose to the bait. It would probably be a long time before he could land another such good-paying job. Of course, there were risks—that was to be expected in accepting a two-gun man job.

"Your name?" Jib Stoney snapped out the question bluntly.

"Lee Bridges," the other replied.

"Meet me at Blow's Livery Stable to-morrow at noon," Stoney said, and walked with springy strides back to where Sandy Crapes was slumped over the small card table in the corner.

Stoney tapped the old man on the shoulder, issued a few words, and the ex-mule-skinner got to his feet. He steadied himself by grasping a chair, shook wisps of gray hair out of his eyes, then threw back his shoulders with a visible effort and followed Stoney's lead.

"It's like I said, huh, Bridges?" the barkeeper asked the moment Stoney and Crapes disappeared through the outer door of the hotel.

Lee shrugged his shoulders.

" 'Bout Jib allus gittin' what he goes after," the barkeeper explained.

"Who couldn't—if he always paid the price," retorted Lee, for some reason or other not elated by the prospect of this big-paying job.

The barkeeper checked the retort which was on the tip of his tongue, smirked knowingly, stooped and pulled the bottle of choice liquor from under the bar. "This is on me," he said and filled two glasses, clinking his against Lee's. "And here's hopin' you're quicker on the draw than them which ain't friendly to Jib Stoney," he concluded.

"You didn't hear me say that I'd take the job, did you?" asked Lee sharply. Again he saw the sneer creasing the barkeeper's fat red cheeks.

"Mebbe Jib sized you up wrong, what? Here's how jest the same."

"No!" Lee's jaw protruded aggressively. "We'll drink to your first toast," he said. He quaffed the contents of the glass in one swallow. There was adventure ahead of him—of that he felt sure. Jib Stoney would prove a hard master. He wasn't paying stiff wages for nothing; and, besides, Lee remembered the quest which had prompted him to leave the Buckjump Ranch. He was seeking Kala Dale, who lived on a ranch somewhere north of Toptown. And Rattletrap Valley lay in that direction.

CHAPTER II.

OLD HIKE'S GIRL.

"YOU'RE on time, I see," Jib Stoney remarked, and Lee turned from the blanket roll he was tying to the back of his saddle—the voice rasping unpleasantly in his ears. Jib Stoney's black eyes raked him from top to toe.

"Good thing you're prompt," he said. "They's a ten-mile ride ahead of us, so we'll amble right along." Stoney walked past Lee, who had led his own saddle pony just outside the barn doors.

Close behind Stoney shuffled Sandy Crapes—his eyes downcast and shaded by the brim of his old black hat. The old man did not even glance at Lee, but plodded on into the barn—his shoulders sagging as though carrying an invisible but heavy burden.

Lee finished knotting the straps that held his blanket roll in place and vaulted into the saddle. He didn't have long to wait for his future employer, who had issued curt orders to the stableboy to throw the saddles on his own bay and on Crapes' mule. Stoney sprang into his saddle easily, and waited until Sandy Crapes mounted the chunky brown mule which the boy brought out. With a jerk of his head, Stoney beckoned them to follow his lead; and the strangely assorted trio struck into the

dusty road winding out of Toptown and on toward the low hills to the north.

Lee expected that Stoney would give him a detailed account of what his new duties were to be, but the man said nothing as mile after mile was covered. Lee kept silent, too, believing that it was not his duty to open the conversation. Jib Stoney was sure a puzzler; likewise, was Sandy Crapes, who trailed behind, slumped low in his saddle, apparently seeing nothing beyond the long, flopping ears of his mule.

Six miles of silence and Stoney swerved off the main-traveled road, where it cut through the rocks. The branch road crossed a plateau and entered a cañon with an average steep pitch. A mile of climbing brought the small cavalcade to the shoulder of a mountain overlooking the sage plains. Stoney halted his horse, and Lee turned to view the sweep of country over which they had traveled. He could see the wide semicircle of rocks which appeared to be rough ramparts thrown up by some prehistoric tribe. A lavender sea of sage spread out from the little cow town of Toptown. The shafts of the western sun created a bluish haze which quivered over the sagebrush. Far beyond the flats rose the purple outlines of the Warner Mountains, looming upon the eastern horizon.

Seemingly within a stone's throw lay the plateau this side of the rocks; and the cañon extended just beneath the crest of the ridge on which they were breathing their perspiring horses. Lee's roving eyes glimpsed a vista through a gap in the range on the far side of the cañon. The lush green of growing grain was framed in the darker green of pines; an irregular line of willows marked the course of a stream through the cultivated fields. Looking more closely, Lee thought that he could distinguish panels of a crooked rail fence.

"Sweet-lookin' clearing over there." he remarked, pointing his quirt toward the vista.

"Huh!" Jib Stoney's grunt was the first syllable that he had uttered since they had left Toptown.

Lee shot him a glance. The man's black brows were drawn in a scowl across the bridge of his hawk's nose. There was a sultry glow in the black pools of his eyes which were glaring at the green fields visible through the gap. There occurred to Lee a fragment of the barkeeper's conversation, "It's a right purty spot in the mountains."

"Is that Rattletrap Valley?" inquired Lee abruptly.

"Yeah," affirmed Jib Stoney. "And if Old Hike don't kick through, they'll be nothin' but sagebrush growin' thar in another year," he mumbled resentfully.

A movement from Sandy Crapes drew Lee's attention to that grizzled mule-skinner who had ridden close behind Stoney. Crapes had pulled a gun from his holster—his gray beard wagging up and down nervously as he deliberately took aim at the back of Jib Stoney's head.

Quick as a flash Lee swung far out of his saddle, making a left-handed swoop with his quirt. The rawhide thongs coiled round the short barrel of the six-gun, and, with a snap of his wrist, Lee yanked the weapon out of the old man's hand. A gasp of rage from Crapes and the clank of the gun hitting the ground were the first warning that Stoney had of the averted tragedy. He turned in his saddle, jerking out his own gun as he glared, first at Lee, than at Sandy Crapes.

"What's goin' on here?" he demanded harshly.

"Wowie! But I sure pulled a boner tryin' to quirt that old hossfly," retorted Lee, catching and holding the frantic gaze of Crapes. "Guess I scared Sandy, here, most off his mule."

Lee leaped to the ground and picked up the gun. "Here, Sandy. Your gun flopped out of your belt." He placed the pistol in the old mule-skinner's shaking palm.

Sandy Crapes blinked his gray eyes, wagged his head in dumb confusion, and fumbled nervously in thrusting the pistol into its frayed holster.

"I'd advise you to cut out them monkey-shines, Bridges," snapped Stoney. "A false move like that's apt to fill you full o' lead, savvy?" Stoney hesitated in sheathing his own gun. He didn't seem to be entirely satisfied with Lee's explanation, for he reined his horse to one side and spoke to Crapes.

"You go on up to my ranch, Sandy. Tell the cook that we'll be there fer supper. And you wait fer me, understand?"

Lee felt uneasy as he watched Crapes rein his brown mule up the ridge trail. Why had Sandy pulled a gun on Stoney? Was the old duffer crazy, Lee wondered. He hadn't said a word, but there certainly was a volume of hatred in his eyes when he drew bead on Stoney's head. Had Stoney gotten the old man into some kind of a jam? Lee was puzzled, and, for some unknown reason, his sympathies were entirely with Sandy Crapes. He'd stick to that yarn about the horsefly and not tell the straight of what had happened if Stoney got curious. But Jib Stoney didn't refer to the affair. Instead, he proceeded to give Lee instructions about his job of ditch tending.

"We'll foller this short-cut trail to the ditch you're to look after," said Stoney, reining his horse through a draw which slanted down the slope of the ridge in the opposite direction from the gap disclosing that vista of Rattletrap Valley.

There was but a light growth of timber upon the side hill and Lee, peering through the trunks of the pines, saw the mounded earth forming the bank of the ditch which skirted the base of the slope.

"Thar she be!" Jib Stoney said, and made a sweeping gesture which roughly traced the course of the ditch up and down the cañon. "I've sunk a pile of money in this here ditch, 'count of that plumb idiot backin' down on his agreement. If he'd stuck to his bargain, I'd had Rattletrap Valley chuck full and runnin' over by now. Enough water to irrigate them ten thousand acres of rich land jest outa Toptown. Old Hike's daffy, but I'll fetch him to terms or go broke doin' it," Jib talked as he rode—his words edged with cutting venom.

"How much of a ditch is it?" inquired Lee.

"It begins whar Rattletrap Creek forks two miles north o' here, and follers this cañon clear through them rimrocks west o' Toptown. A good ten miles of ditch Old Hike's forced me to dig. Curses on his fool head!" Jib Stoney said—as voluble now as he had been glumly silent during the first part of the trip.

"And Sandy Crapes? How's he mixed up in this ditch business?" Lee wanted to know.

"That old fossil," snorted Stoney. "He squatted on the headwaters o' Rattletrap Creek thirty years back—owns the whole flow o' water and leases some to me and some to Old Hike. I've bought up the whole flow from him yesterday and got Old Hike whar I wants him." A dry chuckle from Stoney.

"How come?" asked Lee.

"Why, Old Hike won't git no more water to irrigate his crops, that's how come," crowed Jib Stoney exultantly. "I'll be turnin' Rattletrap Creek into that thar ditch to-morrow 'less Old Hike agrees to sell me his valley fer a reservoir site. Listen, Bridges, your job is to warn off Old Hike's hombres from tamperin' with my ditch line. You carryin' only one gun?" The cold,

black eyes rested on the holster slung at Lee's right thigh.

"A six-gun and my Winchester," replied Lee.

"I'll furnish you with a extry six-gun. And mind you, don't be slow on the draw if you're figgerin' to collect wages at the end of the month," Jib reminded him.

They were following the ditch line, the ponies picking their way over the rough trail on the shoveled-up bank.

"Don't stop to argue if you spots any hombres prowlin' along my ditch. Plug 'em pronto, git me?" Jib went on.

"A killer's job and no mistake," commented Lee dryly.

"Look here, Bridges, you knowed this wasn't no meetin' when you hired out to me. If you're gittin' cold feet say so and git off the job," Jib Stoney said and twisted about in his saddle, his lips curled, revealing big buck teeth in a sneer of contempt.

Before Lee had a chance to make up his mind one way or another, a sharp report thrummed up from the thickets of pines and quaking aspen growing in the depths of the cañon below the ditch line. Stoney pulled his horse to a sudden halt and Lee's animal stopped, its nose against the bay's flank. There was a repetition of that first report, then a series of cracklings, like the rolling of an Indian war drum.

Jib Stoney rose in his stirrups and peered down the hillside, his fingers curling around the butt of his six-gun. Lee looked in the same direction, trying to pierce the tangle of trees and brush in the cañon below. He could see nothing on account of the dense thickets, but the crackling reports continued to echo up and down the cañon.

"What is it?" he asked softly, his curiosity keenly aroused.

"That whip-crackin' gal of Old Hike's!" came the snarling whisper from Jib Stoney.

"You mean that it's a girl crackin' a whip like that?" exclaimed Lee in surprise and doubt.

"Exactly, and some little fire-eater at that. But I'm bettin' that she'll crack no more whips when I turns Rattletrap Creek into my ditch," vowed Jib Stoney gloatingly. "I'll bust her spirit by dryin' up her old man's fields, I will. She'll eat outa my hand once she learns I got Sandy Crapes on my side. I got her whar I wants her, the little catamount."

The popping of the whip ceased. The echoes lingered longer, but gradually died away to faint lispings. Lee rose in his stirrups, a strange foreboding stealing over him as he searched the cañon below for a glimpse of Old Hike's girl. Was that a flicker of red down there among the quaking aspens? He strained his eyes, but the tiny speck disappeared—or perhaps it was merely his overwrought imagination and he was seeing things. He turned his head and stared at the square-set shoulders, the ugly head, and hawklike nose of the man who had hired him to do his killing.

"Say, who is this Old Hike?" An ominous chill tingled Lee's spine as he added, "What's his other name?"

"Ho, you're a stranger in these parts, if you ain't heard tell of Old Hike Dale?" Jib Stoney remarked, settling slowly back into his saddle.

"Hike Dale!" Lee's fingers quivered as he raised his quirt and pointed to where he had seen the flicker of a red hair-ribbon down among the quaking aspens. "Who's that girl, then?" he asked.

"Kala Dale, Old Hike's daughter," came the twanging, dominant response, "And it's me that's goin' to tame her. She'll marry me as pay fer them ten miles o' ditch Old Hike buncoed me into diggin'! She'll do it, too, afore she'll see Rattletrap Valley dried up into a sagebrush holler. It'll be me which'll hold the whip hand after this, and I'll use it a-plenty, that I will!"

CHAPTER III.

THE WHIP.

LEE stiffened in his saddle at this astonishing news. Jib Stoney was raving—Kala Dale wouldn't marry a man of Stoney's caliber under any condition. But what did he know about Kala Dale other than what Nora Willis had told him? Lee clutched at the front of his shirt where he carried the brass-plated collar bearing Kala's name. Nora Willis' description of the girl had fired his fancy. And he had ridden forth on a romantic and venturesome quest. He'd found Kala Dale, after joining forces with a man who was planning to break the girl's valiant spirit. But he had signed no contract, hadn't even verbally agreed to work for Jib Stoney.

Lee swallowed hard, striving to think what could best be done. Better quit Stoney cold. He'd ride straight down the hill and tell the girl what the crafty man was planning to do. The cowboy settled back in his saddle, clearing his throat as he groped for words harsh enough to hurl at the man who had hired him to do his killing.

And then Lee swallowed hard again. Supposing he did refuse the job? Stoney would find another man to guard the ditch, somebody who would have no scruples about shooting Old Hike Dale, or the girl, herself, if she rebelled against Stoney's cruel orders. A grim smile suddenly twitched Lee's lips. He had stumbled blindly into a position where he could be of the greatest help to Kala Dale. Jib Stoney had unwittingly exposed the cards by which he schemed to win the girl. He'd play them to the limit, of that Lee was positive. There wasn't any trickery or fiendish plan which he would pass up if it would gain him his cruelly selfish ends.

"Huh!" Lee muttered aloud, and Jib Stoney fixed him with black eyes, which were splotched with uncanny lights.

"You said something?" he asked.

"Nope," Lee managed a grin as he continued, "I was just thinking that we was going to be late for supper."

"Ho," a boastful smirk displayed Stoney's buck teeth. "Ain't interested in a wild mountain gal, huh? Waal, I reckon most fellers'd choose the doll sort. Not me, though," he stated. Stoney squared his heavy shoulders and thrust out his chest in a masterful pose. He peered down through the trees, listening for further poppings of the whip lash, being visibly eager for a glimpse of the girl hidden among the quaking aspens.

Several minutes passed, and they heard no further crackings of the whip.

"Come on, Bridges, let's git outa here," Stoney remarked, spurring his horse along the ditch bank.

The path was too narrow to permit them to ride abreast. And Lee fell in behind Stoney, who kept twisting and turning in his saddle, apparently on the lookout for Old Hike Dale's daughter.

"Not interested in a wild-mountain girl?" Jib Stoney's slurring gibe rankled in Lee's mind. Why, it was because he knew that with a savage dog big as a catamount for a pet, she'd be anything but a doll, that had stirred Lee's imagination. And, added to his own idea of the girl, was Nora Willis' account of Kala's courageous fight against those who had attempted to brand her as a cheat. He stroked the little bunch formed by the dog's collar beneath his shirt front.

He was aware that Jib Stoney had fixed him with a steady glare—his round head turned on his square shoulders. Lee returned the scrutiny and calmly inquired:

"Say, is it true what I heard about this Kala Dale's ownin' savage dogs, sorta yellow, and big as catamounts?"

"Br-r!" Stoney's cold black eyes

flickered menacingly. "She does, drat her! Beasts which oughta be shot on sight, them killin' cattle. Ain't objectin' to earnin' an extry fifty dollars, Bridges?" Stoney inquired.

"How?" asked Lee.

"By fetchin' in the scalps of them yaller hounds," Stoney answered.

"You hired me for ditch tender, not dog killer," replied Lee gruffly.

"A noble pair, you two!" The voice rang out with clear, firm tones. Branches crackled in a copse of young firs edging the bank of the ditch. A girl, mounted on a sorrel pony, bounded into the patch less than fifteen feet in front of Jib Stony.

The pony stood broadside across the ditch trail, the girl partially turned in the saddle so that she faced the two men. Clasped in her right hand was a polished shaft of wood—perhaps four feet in length—and coiled around it the finely braided strands of flexible leather ending in strips of buckskin that formed the lash.

But it was the girl, not the mettlesome pony nor the formidable-looking whip, that absorbed Lee's attention. Her jetty hair wasn't plaited with red ribbons, according to Nora Willis' description. It was cropped instead—a bandeau of red Indian beads binding the wavy masses. Her eyes were a vivid hazel, fringed with lashes so dusky that they deepened the hazel into shades of brown. She wore a boy's blue flannel shirt, and riding breeches were tucked into buckskin leggings, beaded and fringed, as were the moccasins thrust into her stirrups.

"So, you'd kill my dogs, would you?" she asked. And again her clear voice vibrated resonantly. "Brave specimens of mankind—I don't think!"

She bestowed a scathing glance upon Lee Bridges, then confronted Jib Stoney with open hostility. The blustering man was ill at ease for a moment—his murky eyes darting hither and yon. He recovered his poise shortly, however, and chuckled hoarsely, a gloating expression showing in his ruggedly featured face.

"So—you think that I ain't got nothin' better to do than order your hounds scalped, huh, Kala?" He prodded his horse a step nearer to her—leaning forward as he continued: "S'posin' I tell you that I'm sluicin' Rattletrap Creek into my ditch first thing to-morrow mornin'? What'll you say to that, my gal?"

"I've heard you brag about doing such things before, Jib Stoney," she flung the words at him scornfully. "And I know that that's one of the few things that you can't put over." She shortened the reins and was in the act of taking the ditch at a jump, when Stoney's rasping voice checked her.

"I'm puttin' it over this time, Kala. Sandy Crapes has sold me rights to every inch of water in Rattletrap Creek," he said.

"Sandy sold out to you! Oh, that's a lie!" She clenched her lower lip under small white teeth. "The idea of Sandy Crapes selling to you! He'd do it just about as quickly as my father would sell you Rattletrap Valley, Jib Stoney." She touched her heels to the sorrel's flanks, and the nimble pony cleared the ditch in a single bound.

"Waal, I've warned you, Kala, so's you'd know what's up when Rattletrap Valley goes dry. It's a fact—Sandy's sold me his land and all water rights," Stoney went on.

"I don't believe it. Sandy wouldn't sell—not to you," she retorted, but not with the assurance that she had first displayed.

"Listen, Kala," Stoney called to her insinuatingly. "There's a way to stop dryin' up Rattletrap Valley. You know what it is, don't you?"

She had halted her pony on the opposite bank of the ditch, probably twenty

feet distant from where Jib Stoney sat his horse. Rising in her stirrups, the girl shook the coils of braided leather free of the whipstock, slung back her right arm, and with a deft and lightninglike movement, sent the lash spinning through the air. It cracked with the report of a six-gun once, twice, three times. Jib Stoney's hat flew off, and he ducked low on the safe side of his horse.

Lee was fascinated by this remarkable skill in whip tactics. The girl's forearm and wrist propelled the lash with such ease and rapidity that she did not seem to be exerting an ounce of effort. Her finely marked brows were a level line across the bridge of her short nose; the dusky, fringed hazel eyes were snapping in accord with the popping of the lash; bright disks of crimson glowed in the olive of her cheeks. With a flip of her wrist, Kala Dale rewound the corded thongs around the handle, tossed her wavy curls defiantly, and, with moccasined heels pressing the flanks of her pony, darted off up the slope and disappeared among the thickets of young firs and manzanita.

"The little fiend!" Jib Stoney remarked, cautiously pulling himself to an upright position in his saddle. He glared at the shaking branches where the girl had ridden off the scene. "A r'arin', t'arin' filly, wilder'n wild hosses, that gal! But I've broke broncs right off the range with whip and spur, and I'll l'arn Kala who's boss afore I git through with her." He rocked to and fro in his rage, ignoring Lee who was inwardly rejoicing at the outcome of this snappy little episode.

Stoney clambered out of his saddle and picked up his hat, emphatically vowing by just what process he intended to break the spirit of Kala Dale. He shot a sultry glance at Lee as he was about to remount, and of a sudden the angry red suffusing his face faded to a sickly gray. His lips loosened and trembled. The widened black eyes were staring directly past Lee, who, mystified at this abrupt change, peered over his shoulder.

Crouched in the narrow path on the ditch bank and scarcely a pony's length behind him, was a great, tawny dog. Wild eyes flamed in the flattened head, and the bristles lifted along the nape of the arched neck.

"Shoot it!" Stoney's low whisper reached Lee's ears.

Lee's right hand dropped to the butt of his six-gun and remained there, but he didn't draw. He just sat and admired the splendid strength and courage of the mastiff. He couldn't have shot it, even had he not known that it belonged to Kala Dale.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Jib Stoney reach for his gun; and Lee quickly reined his pony between the man and the dog. The mastiff uttered a deep growl, sprang across the ditch, landing in a jungle of manzanita, and streaked out of sight, wary and fleet as a mountain lion. Both horses snorted and reared. Stoney lunged for his bridle reins and managed to lift himself into the saddle, sputtering and cursing at Lee.

"You dumb idiot! Why didn't you plug it!" he asked. But there wasn't time for further argument with the horses bolting along the crumbling bank of the ditch.

It was some little time before the panicky animals were quieted to a running walk. They had covered considerable distance in their stampede—the scenery flying past so rapidly that Lee hadn't noticed just when they had swerved off the path on the ditch bank.

The trail that they were now following led through scattering pines growing on a comparatively level stretch. Ahead of Stoney's nervously prancing horse, Lee saw a clearing, inclosed by a rail fence. Soon they rode through

a gate and across a meadow to a cluster of buildings on the far side of the clearing.

Stoney broke the glum silence which he had maintained since the encounter with Kala Dale's great dog.

"This here's my place," he said.

It wasn't a model cattle ranch. To Lee it had the marks of a rustler's hang-out, and he doubted that he'd be able to play a lone hand against Stoney's hard-bitten crew.

Stoney's jaw was clenched in sullen lines, when he halted his horse in front of the crude log-walled ranch house.

A young puncher emerged from a shack of poles just beyond the barn and corrals and hurriedly approached.

"Show Bridges, here, where to corral his nag and stow his blankets, Dobie," Jib Stoney issued the orders gruffly. He dismounted, and the puncher took the bridle reins.

"Is Sandy Crapes over there in the bunk house?" asked Stoney as he started toward the door of the ranch house. "If he is, send him here quick."

"I ain't seen Sandy for two or three days," replied Dobie.

"You mean that Sandy didn't show up here 'bout a hour back?" demanded Stoney testily.

"I been right here on the job all afternoon, and nobody's showed up," came young Dobie's convincing answer.

"The consarned idiot!" And, beginning with this mild expletive, Stoney swore volubly, then stamped into the house—his harsh voice drifting out through the open door.

"He throws them fits right reg'lar," dryly commented Dobie, giving Lee the once-over. "You joinin' up with Stoney, Bridges?" he asked.

Lee inclined his head as he reined his pony alongside the puncher.

"We'll be needin' your help all right, hey, 'Speck?'" Dobie addressed a freckled, lanky cowboy, leaning against the casing of the barn door.

"Depends," said Speck, fingering the brace of guns slanted over his hips. "Did Stoney wise you up 'bout this bein' sumthin' more'n a range-ridin' job?"

"He did allow that I was to pack an extra gun," said Lee carelessly.

"And you'll need it soon's Jib shuts off Hike Dale's water supply," prophesied Speck. "That whole kit and crew'll swarm over here pronto, and all arguin'll be done with lead. Hey, Dobie?"

"I'll tell the world," agreed young Dobie.

"But Stoney claims that he bought the rights to that water supply," said Lee, hesitating before stripping saddle and bridle from his pony.

"Mebbe he did, mebbe he didn't, but the fight's on when Hike Dale's ditch goes dry. If the boss ain't said it, he will afore he turns you loose with your two guns, 'bout shootin' to kill at any and all of Dale's outfit, savin' the gal. He counts on puttin' his own brand on that uppity little firebrand." Speck spoke as though the business of killing men was of no more importance in his life than the rounding up of cattle. And he looked the part—a hard-jawed, small-eyed killer.

"Ain't bluffed out, cowboy?" quizzed young Dobie with a twisted grin.

For answer, Lee removed the saddle and bridle and turned his pony into the corral.

"Where'll I spread down my blankets?" he inquired, as he casually fished the makin's from his pocket and deftly rolled a cigarette.

CHAPTER IV.

AT THE MULE-SKINNER'S CABIN.

"BRIDGES, git your hoss! And fetch mine along with it," Jib Stoney snapped as he arose from the breakfast table.

Lee winced at this sharp command,

but said nothing as he went out of the lean-to where meals were served. Stoney hadn't shown up at supper the night before, and he'd come into breakfast surly as a man with nerves on edge from lack of sleep. And Lee's first night on the ranch had been anything but restful. Stoney's crew was composed of bad hombres. Besides young Dobie and Speck, there was the evil-tongued old cowman, who was prevented from steady riding by having lost a leg. He did the cooking for the outfit. There was a fourth man who hadn't uttered a word in Lee's presence. They called him "Windy," but even the evil-tongued "Peg" treated him with a certain amount of respect, for Windy had a mean eye and a treacherous habit of spinning his guns.

Stoney, Speck, Dobie, Peg and Windy—a tough combination of killers! And Lee, to all outward appearances, had cast in his lot with them. He began to doubt whether he could ever explain to Kala Dale what his motives were. He knew that he'd have a difficult time in convincing her of why he had stayed with Jib Stoney after learning the facts of the situation. And just how he was going to help her was an even bigger problem. He couldn't see his way clearly, didn't even know where Stoney's errand was taking them. But he caught up the horses and had them saddled and bridled in a jiffy. The other men had evidently received their orders, for he passed them on his way to the ranch house.

"Here's that extry six-gun," Jib Stoney said—handed him the weapon, and mounted his horse without any explanation of his next move.

After leaving the ranch, Stoney led the way to the ditch and rode northward along its crooked course, with Lee following. An hour's ride brought them to the crest of the watershed where Rattletrap Creek forked—one branch watering the slope of land wherein Stoney's ranch was located, the second supplying Rattletrap Valley with its precious stream.

"You see," Stoney pointed at the forks with his quirt, "that's a made ditch takin' the water off to Old Hike's valley. He's leased his water from Sandy Crapes who wouldn't sell outright, figgerin' he'd allus have a steady income. The lease runs out to-day and I beats Hike to it, buyin' the whole flow of the crik."

"You're turning the water into your ditch this morning?" inquired Lee.

"Yeah, the boys're comin' up with picks and shovels——" Stoney pricked up his ears, glancing over his shoulder. "That's them now—er—is it?" He twisted about in his saddle, looking this way and that as he endeavored to locate the thudding of hoofs.

"Nobody's coming up your ditch far as I can see," said Lee, though he distinctly heard the click of iron-shod hoofs. "But there's men riding up that other draw."

"Old Hike's lay-out!" muttered Stoney, loosening the gun in his holster. "Git set fer trouble, Bridges."

Lee was studying the man forging ahead of the small group of horsemen ascending the draw. He was spare and tall, with shoulders slightly bent forward, a massive head which seemed even larger because of bushy iron-gray hair, and a full beard. He was a splendid specimen of pioneer stock. And Lee saw in Kala Dale's father a man whom he would prefer as a friend rather than as an enemy in spite of his years.

A hurried, though appraising, survey of the men accompanying Old Hike Dale was sufficient to impress Lee that they were a hard-riding, doughty group —three whites and a lithe Indian lad, all of them armed for action.

Hike Dale stopped his horse on the opposite bank of the creek, and with a backward heave of his bushy head,

scrutinized his bitter enemy, scarcely noticing Lee.

"What's this I hear about dryin' up Rattletrap Valley, Stoney?" he asked.

"It's that floodin' it fer a reservoir," retorted Stoney evenly, though his black eyes jumped from man to man lining up with Dale.

"Yeah?" The manner in which Dale squared himself in his saddle was more threatening than the brandishing of guns and a volley of threats. "What's your next move, Stoney?" he deliberately inquired.

Stoney was uneasy, and cast furtive glances down the trail that they had ascended. Lee wondered how Stoney intended handling the situation until reënforced by his own bunch of killers.

"It's a plain business deal, Dale. You wouldn't come through on your promise to sell me Rattletrap Valley, so I buys the crik offn Sandy Crapes," Stoney explained.

"Where's the proof of that sale?" demanded Old Hike coolly.

"You don't think that I'm packin' valuable papers round with me, do you?" Lee, watching Stoney closely, saw the murky eyes take on a crafty gleam. "But if you're wantin' proofs, s'posin' we go have a talk with Sandy Crapes."

Without giving Stoney a direct answer, Hike Dale turned to his men and issued brief directions: "Stand guard over my ditch gate, boys, till I come back." He spurred his horse through the rippling waters of the creek and started for the shacks and corrals built in the lee of a granite ridge farther up the mountain meadow.

"Come on, Bridges!" Stoney spoke gruffly to Lee, and hastily overhauled Kala Dale's father.

It was a rugged section of country—this mule ranch owned by Sandy Crapes. It was a meadow rimmed in by lofty mountain peaks. No effort had been made to till the ground, but there was feed in abundance, for the meadow was well watered by the springs which fed Rattletrap Creek. Sandy had erected his crude pole shack among the trembling, quaking aspens, growing around the biggest spring which gushed out of a fissure in the granite outcropping. It was a wild and picturesque spot, appealing to Lee's liking for the range country. They passed a few mules cropping grass along the creek. Nearing the corrals, Lee noticed that the bars were down and the feed-racks picked clean of hay.

Hike Dale rode on without deigning to argue with Jib Stoney and Lee held his own tongue, though his mind was active in conjecturing what the outcome of the feud would be. Arriving at the cabin, which was roofed with cedar stakes and boasted of a huge fireplace built of unhewn stones, Hike and Stoney dismounted. Lee followed suit, curious to witness the meeting between Crapes and Hike Dale.

The slab door was shut, but a short rope dangled through a hole in one of the slabs. Dale marched up and, gripping the rope in his left hand, thumped on the slabs with the handle of his quirt. There was no response and Dale yanked on the rope, shoving the door open by heaving against it with his shoulder.

He didn't go clear in, but staggered on the threshold, peering within the room as though halted by some invisible barrier.

"Sandy!" Dale's voice drifted back to Lee's ears and there was a strained anxious note of alarm in it. "Git up, Sandy!"

"What's wrong?" Jib Stoney's manner of speaking diverted Lee's attention from Hike Dale, and he looked at Stoney.

The latter had edged to the doorsill, jostling against Dale as he attempted to peer over his shoulder. Instantly, the older man swung around and faced his

enemy, a strange pallor bleaching his weather-stained skin.

"When'd you last see Sandy?" he asked harshly, accusingly.

"Late yesterday afternoon, only a few minutes afore we met up with your gal, Kala. That's straight, ain't it, Bridges?" Stoney turned to Lee for confirmation of this statement.

"That's the last I saw of him," said Lee, striving to get a glimpse into the mule-skinner's cabin.

Old Hike Dale was visibly upset, and seemed to be sparring for time while he blocked the entrance to the cabin.

"You wasn't up here this morning, Stoney?" Dale's eyes were shadowed with a strange dread, as he asked the question.

"I was not," asserted Jib. "What's eatin' you, Dale? Git outa my way! Give me a look." Stoney pressed forward and, as though still doubting what course to pursue, Dale threw out an arm to check his entering.

Jib ducked under Dale's arm and crossed the threshold, Lee following close on his heels.

"Careful!" Stoney lunged backward, his boot crunching Lee's toes, his hand outstretched in a dramatic gesture.

Lee discovered a body on the puncheon floor. It was sprawled between the table legs fronting the doorway. Lee advanced a step, for something which involuntarily drew him forward, caught his eyes.

"Huh!" A growl as ugly and blustering as that of a savage dog treeing a kitten issued from Stoney's lips. "So —that's why you didn't want me to see what'd happen, eh, Dale?"

Hike Dale whipped out his gun, but a spell of giddiness swept over him and he slumped against the door, jamming it flat to the wall with a crash. The gun shook in his hand and his face paled. Jib Stoney was quick to take advantage of this momentary lapse and struck the gun from Dale's trembling fingers, plucking his own weapon from its holster before Dale's clumped to the floor.

"How come that to be here?" Stoney said, pointing the pistol at the lifeless body of Sandy Crapes. "You recognizes it, don't you?" His cold black eyes glittered shrewdly.

"Fool!" Hike Dale had gained control of his shattered nerves. The bushy head went up with a belligerent fling, the fine old eyes flashed valiantly. "Don't you dare breathe a word of your vile suspicions," he said. "I'll kill you, Stoney, if you do!" Unarmed, he strode toward Stoney, ignoring the gun hinged on his enemy's hip.

"Bah! Wasn't you wantin' to brand me the killer a minute ago? Askin' me if I was up here this mornin'? Here, Bridges," Stoney veered toward Lee suddenly. "Ever seen that before?" he asked.

For a moment Lee's tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. A foreboding chill prickled his spine. There could be no mistaking how Sandy Crapes had met his death. The cords of a whiplash were twisted around the ancient's withered neck. And on the floor beside the dead body lay the whipstock: a staff of polished wood nearly four feet in length.

"You savvies that whip, don't you Bridges?" Stoney's rasping question throbbed in Lee's ears. "You seen who was cuttin' capers with it jest yesterday! You seen her pop my hat offn my head after I told her Sandy Crapes'd sold his water rights to me? Speak up, Bridges! You recognizes that there whip!" Stoney drove the accusations hard and fast.

"I can't swear that it's the same whip," Lee said firmly.

"You can't! Waal, they ain't another whip like that in this neck o' the woods. It's Kala Dale's whip. You heard her throw a fit when she l'arned Sandy'd double crossed her. She

trailed him here after she left us, that's what she done, the wild-cat gal! Answer me this, Dale—what time did Kala git home last night?"

The older man lunged for Stoney, who side-stepped him easily, keeping him covered as he did so. Lee whipped out his own gun.

"Hold on, Stoney! This has gone too far." He spoke sharply, decisively. "Drop your gun!"

Stoney whirled—his intentions evident by the ugly glare in his black eyes. Lee shot, the bullet hitting the other's six-gun and sending it to the floor almost on top of Dale's weapon.

"Up with your hands!" Lee held the muzzle of his gun within a foot of Stoney's face. "You got no right saying Kala Dale's guilty. She couldn't do a thing like that and you know it," Lee went on.

"It's her whip!" snarled Jib Stoney. "You sneakin' double crosser!" His murky eyes bored into Lee's with vicious hatred.

The clatter of hoofbeats thrummed through the open doorway. Hike Dale, who was standing nearest the threshold, turned and glanced out, then wheeled hastily and strode toward the lifeless body on the floor. Stooping, he began to loosen the coils of the whip, fumbling them in his panicky rush. Raising his bushy head, he appealed to Lee.

"Shut the door! Shut it!"

"You got no right touchin' a murdered man," protested Jib Stoney. "Look here, Dale; I'll keep mum on this if you turns over Rattletrap Valley same's you agreed to. Understand—it's Rattletrap er Kala swings fer murder!"

Lee was sidling toward the door, his gun trained on Stoney as he moved. Just as he reached out his left hand to grasp the door, a shadow fell across the threshold, instantly followed by the slender figure of Kala Dale herself.

"What'd I hear?" Her voice rang out with vivid clearness. "Murder!" She stood poised on the sill, hazel eyes darting from Lee to Jib Stoney and finally resting on her father, who was shielding from her view as best he could the inert body of Sandy Crapes.

She sprang into the room and glided across the floor.

"Dad, what're you doing?" She swayed back, a spasm of horror flitting over her face. "Sandy! Oh, is he dead, dad?"

"Murdered!" It was a harsh croaking from Jib Stoney. "Strangled to death by your wh——"

Lee lunged for Stoney, shoving the muzzle of his gun fiercely against his breast. "Keep your mouth shut!" he commanded.

"No, let him talk!" Kala Dale straightened her slim shoulders as she confronted the sputtering Stoney.

"It's your whip done fer Sandy. Lookut—your old man's takin' it offn his neck. Your whip, Kala—git me?" The lines in Stoney's face twisted diabolically.

"My whip! Sandy strangled!" The girl's lips went white.

"Yeah, with your whip—none other," croaked Stoney gloatingly.

"And you accuse me of murdering poor old Sandy Crapes?" The hazel eyes suddenly lost their expression of horror and grief, darkening and glittering, as she stared at Jib Stoney and asked him the question.

When he tried to meet her gaze unflinchingly, his eyes fell and she turned to Lee.

"And you, of course Stoney's paying you to swear to this trumped-up charge against me!" She didn't wait for his answer, but picked up the two guns, lying on the floor, covering both Lee and Stoney.

"Quick, dad! Unarm them!" she said.

Lee felt as though he were merely an onlooker in this strange affair. He

could easily have gained control of the situation, for the girl, courageous and cool as she was, failed to keep him covered. He watched her father arise, holding the coils of the whip loosely in one hand. Before Hike Dale reached his daughter's side, Lee heard the rattling fire of guns from without.

With a swift movement, Kala Dale pressed one gun into her father's hand, snatched the whipstock from him, gave him the second gun, and glided to the opposite side of the room. Flipping the rawhide coils of the whip free of the stock, she faced Lee and Jib Stoney.

"Hurry, dad! That's Stoney's gang sneaking up on our boys!" she said, sending the whiplash singing through the air, popping it with a deafening report midway between Lee and Stoney. "I'll take care of these cowards. Quick, go help our boys fight for our water rights!"

CHAPTER V.

AT BAY.

HIKE DALE shook his big head, concern for his daughter's safety showing in his brooding eyes, but the persistent crackling of guns drawing him to the open door of the cabin.

"I tell you I'm not afraid of these bullies. I saw Stoney's gang riding up the ditch, carrying picks and shovels. Don't let them shut off our water, dad! Go help our boys! Go!" Kala Dale stamped her small foot impetuously; then, as though demonstrating how perfectly capable she was of holding her prisoners at bay, she lashed out with the deadly whip. The cabin was filled with the snapping reports. The stinging buckskin thongs slashed a rent in Jib Stoney's sombrero, and bit a triangular section clean out of Lee Bridges' heavy flannel shirt sleeve.

"They accuse me of murdering poor old Sandy with my whip, do they!" Kala's voice was tragic in its denunciation of this cruel charge. "Hurry, dad! These cowards won't dare make a false move!"

A volley of shots sounded from the factions battling down at the forks of the creek. Old Hike Dale wavered on the threshold.

"Bridges, there—mebbe he'd come over to our side——" he began.

"This isn't the time or place for maybes," declared Kala.

"I'd oughta hogtie 'em," protested Dale.

"No, no—don't lose a second. Go, dad!" In her desperation, she goaded him out of the door by snapping the whip at his feet.

A few seconds later, Lee heard the pounding of hoofs and sensed that Dale was racing down the meadow to join his own men. He glanced at Jib Stoney, whose murky black eyes were fastened upon the girl in a hypnotic stare. The lines in his hard face were knotted by the clenching of his jaws. He stood with shoulders hunched forward as though ready to spring upon Kala should she relax her vigilant guard for a second. Lee was in a quandary. If he could only convince the girl that he was eager to fight to death for her cause, Jib Stoney would be at their mercy. But she wouldn't listen to any plea that he might offer—of that he was sure. She had every reason to believe that he was allied with Stoney's disreputable gang. The leather collar bearing that inscription, "Return to Kala Dale!" If he showed it to her, told her that that was the mission which brought him here, would she trust him? He hoped that she would, and raised his hand to reassure himself that the dog's collar was tucked in his shirt where it pouched over his belt.

Z-zip! The whirring of rawhide thongs and the sharp snapping of the buckskin lash, so close to his cheek that he felt the skin quiver, jolted him out of his reverie. But Lee didn't flinch

under this near-flaying. He looked at Kala, and recalled what Nora Willis had told him about how this gypsylike lass had whipped the two girls who had accused her of cheating in school. Kala was displaying the same spirit in this affair, only with added courage to fit the more desperate conditions. The hazel eyes glowed with remarkable lights; the lips were firmly closed, forming a scarlet line of loveliness in the olive pallor of her face. She was slight, but there wasn't a single indication of weakness in her willowy movements as she deftly wielded the whip.

And Jib Stoney had boasted about breaking that fine spirit! Why, the girl would kill herself rather than submit to the brute's terms.

A fusillade of shots sent echoes winging back from the granite ridge behind the cabin. Then an agonized cry, as though a human being were mortally wounded, vibrated through the room. Lee saw the girl's lips tremble. The whipstock sagged through the loosening grip of her fingers. So intent was he upon Kala's misery that he forgot the presence of Jib Stoney till the creaking of puncheon planks caused Lee quickly to turn his head.

Stoney had snatched the table off the floor and, holding it in front of him as a shield, was in the act of rushing Kala. She saw him at the identical moment Lee did. But it was too late to break down Stoney's guard with her whip. Lee experienced a horrible vision of the girl's being crushed beneath the impact of the table.

There was a sickening crash even as he shuddered at the consequences. Stoney had battered against the wall in the exact spot where Kala had stood. Lee's breath hissed in a gasp of terrible rage at this brutal attack. He hadn't been quite swift enough in his charge to save the girl, but fell upon Stoney as the latter jumped away from the splintered table.

"You fiend!" Lee's fingers dug into the man's corded throat muscles and, with a mighty heave, he threw him to the floor, putting every ounce of his strength in that strangling grip. But Jib Stoney was no weakling. He flipped this way and that, striking out wickedly with his spurred boots, stripping Lee's chaps into shreds as he kicked and thrashed about on the floor.

A nasty blow from the spurs ripped Lee's shirt open above the belt line and caused his fingers to slip. Stoney squirmed free and scrambled to his knees, reaching for a three-legged stool close at hand. Swinging this cudgel in a vicious arc, he strove to brain Lee, who, by a superhuman effort, jerked his head aside; and the stool dented the plank flooring where his head had lain. Lee rolled over on his stomach and jackknifed to his feet as Stoney again reached for the stool. Lee slugged him with his fists, crowding him away from the stool and against the end wall of the room. Each blow was motivated by contempt for the bully's beastly attack on Kala Dale, reënforced by his own personal hatred for the man. He hammered with relentless fury, and Stoney, almost helpless in an encounter where he was deprived of six-guns and knives, and relying only on his fists, went groggy and Lee finished him with a jolt under the jaw.

When Stoney slumped to the floor in a heap, Lee started across the room to where the table stood against the wall. He stepped over the dead body of Sandy Crapes, took another stride forward, and halted, for the girl suddenly sidled out from behind the table.

"Stop where you are!" A snap of her wrist and she held the whip in readiness to keep him at his distance.

"Y-you're not hurt?" Lee gasped in relief and astonishment.

"Through no thanks to you. I ducked under that shelf on the wall. That alone saved me," she said.

"Great heavens, but I'm glad." Lee turned a trifle giddy, for he had received hard punishment in his tussle with Stoney.

"What's your game, double crossing your noble boss?" she asked, sarcasm in her voice as she cast a scornful glance at the hulking figure of Jib Stoney sprawled on the floor.

"It's not what you think. There's no time to explain now," he lifted his head, listening for sounds of battle from the fighters down on the ditch. "Will you trust me to fight on your side?" he asked.

"Why should I?" Kala retorted.

Lee inclined his head toward the beaten Stoney.

She understood what he meant and answered: "How do I know that you tackled him on my account? It looked more like a personal grudge that you had against him."

"It's hard to convince you why I came here, but wait——" Lee felt of his shirt front. "Why, why, it's gone!" he exclaimed.

"What's gone?" She asked searchingly.

"Something I had belonging to you. That was why I came here, to return it to you," he kept patting his shirt—baffled to think how he had lost that odd talisman.

"Oh!" Her hazel eyes darted past him, focusing upon the floor. "Do you mean *that?*" she asked.

He wheeled and saw the dog's collar lying on the puncheon planks. It had slipped through the rent torn in his shirt by Stoney's spurred heels. Lee turned to recover it, but a stifled scream from the girl caused him to face about before he could pick it up. His gaze swept from her to the open doorway, which seemed to be filled with leering eyes and hideously bared teeth.

After that first shocking glance, Lee recognized young Dobie of the twisted grin; Windy, whose fingers were spinning a six-gun treacherously; and the evil-tongued Peg balancing himself on his one good leg. Three of Jib Stoney's hired killers who had sneaked up and taken them by surprise!

"Dad! Our boys!" Kala Dale's tragic wail throbbed in Lee's ears. "Oh, they've been killed—you murderous brutes have killed my father!"

"You said it," Peg harshly emphasized his retort by stamping on the sill with the stub of his wooden leg. "You ridin' herd on this r'arin' little filly fer Jib, huh, Bridges?" Going across the sill a pace in advance of Windy and young Dobie, Peg gave Sandy Crapes' lifeless body a careless once-over, then stopped when he discovered that second inert figure. He blinked his eyes suspiciously at Lee.

"How come? Was it you done fer Jib, scrappin' over that gal?"

A groan from Stoney warned Lee that the boss of this dangerous gang was regaining his senses.

CHAPTER VI.

HELD AS HOSTAGE.

LEE was stumped. He felt powerless to act, and believed that he could defend neither Kala Dale nor himself, for Jib Stoney was rapidly regaining consciousness. And the moment Stoney could speak, he would brand Lee a traitor to his cause. One word from their boss was all that was needed to set Peg, Windy and young Dobie upon him. And, to make matters worse, Lee hadn't convinced Kala Dale that he stood ready to fight for her interests. She suspected that he had thrown in his lot openly with Jib Stoney, and Lee was sensible enough to understand why she doubted him. He was in a dire predicament, which had been entirely brought about by following the romantic urge to return to Kala Dale that brass-plated dog's collar.

A sputtering, savage growl from

Stoney tensed Lee's nerves. Peg, with Windy and Dobie, were grouped just inside the door. Stoney was elevating himself to an upright position by clawing at the chinked logs of the end wall. Kala had backed against the splintered table, leaning against the side wall midway between Stoney and the members of his silently expectant gang. Sandy Crapes' lifeless body lay on the floor, between Lee and the girl. Lee stepped over the body and took a stand beside Kala, which position enabled him to watch the movements of Stoney and his three henchmen.

"Br-r!" Stoney gained his feet, passed a hand over his brow and shook his aching head—his teeth bared in a distorted grimace of pain and rage. "You sneakin' yaller dog!" he said, pointing an accusing finger at Lee. "You tried to git me, huh? You're one of Old Hike's hired spies, that's what you are—and me took in by a fool trick like that, bah!"

"That's not true!" Kala Dale said, and sidled away from Lee's protection. "My father never saw that man till this morning. He didn't hire him. I don't know him. Where is my father?" She hurled the question at Peg, who teetered in alarm before the threatening lift of her whip.

"Cut that out!" Stoney's harsh voice burred viciously. "I've stood fer enough of your whip stunts, my gal. Watch her, men, and take that whip offn her if she as much as cracks it!" He glared at Kala. "Where's her old man?" He switched his attention to Peg, who acted as spokesman for the hard-visaged trio.

"We got him tied over on the forks of the creek," he answered.

"Oh, you don't mean he's dead—not dead?" Kala's cry was interrupted by Stoney.

"And his outfit—where're they?" he demanded.

"On the run fer home, last we seen of 'em," informed Peg. "Savin' one hombre Speck plugged."

"Where's Speck?" Stoney asked.

"They got him right after he plugged his man," was the answer.

"You say Old Hike's tied?" Stoney went on.

"Yeah, and snubbed to the bulkhead of his ditch."

"Good!" Jib Stoney lurched away from the wall and advanced toward Kala and Lee. The girl didn't retreat, merely gripped the whipstock more firmly as she met the ugly leer in Stoney's eyes. Lee, with only his bare fists for weapons, side-stepped between the oncoming Stoney and Kala.

"Tie up that man!" Stoney snapped out the order to his men. "If he starts ructions, shoot his fool head off."

There was a movement among the trio of killers. Lee saw six-guns bristling in their hands as they closed in on him. And he knew that he was bested. He might have lunged for Stoney, and delivered a nasty blow before those hired assassins riddled him with bullets. That would leave Kala Dale at the mercy of Jib Stoney. Lee clenched his teeth to control the shudder which threatened to rock his whole body. Utter foolishness to resist these doubly-armed desperadoes. He did stand a slim chance to help Kala Dale if he were taken prisoner; but once dead——

For the first time in his life, Lee Bridges refrained from striking a blow in his own defense. Had the girl's safety not been at stake, he couldn't have submitted so tamely to the indignity of being bound hand and foot by Stoney's men. He tried to telegraph a message of hope to the girl, who seemed at a loss what to do. He did seem to catch a spark of sympathy from the heavily-lashed hazel eyes. If he could only prove to her why he had joined forces with Jib Stoney? Futile desire, now that his wrists were tied

behind his back and ropes tightly hobbling his ankles!

And how gamely the girl conducted herself in the midst of these alarming preparations. She had just heard that her father was held a prisoner, that one of his men had been killed. And she certainly must have noticed that Jib Stoney had changed in his feelings for her. His eyes were black pools reflecting resentment, hatred and greed as he kept her cornered, while Lee was being securely roped.

"You see, Kala, that guy's like one of your danged yaller hounds—all fer looks and no courage in a show-down. You goin' to hand over that thar whip 'thout me treatin' you rough?" Stoney demanded.

"How about your own courage, Jib Stoney?" cried Kala Dale, flexing her wrists and poising the whipstock in readiness for use. "Four of you, all armed, tackling one unarmed man! And now you think that I'll give in without a struggle, do you? Well, you're mistaken. I'll show you the real brand of courage if you dare lay hands on me!"

Stoney quailed before that dauntless display of pluck. His strong teeth gnawed his under lip. He hunched his shoulders, forced a rasping chuckle, and partially wheeled away from the girl and spoke to his staring gang.

"Give me one of your guns. That hombre," pointing to Lee, "frisked me of my shootin' arms." Young Dobie handed Stoney the extra six-gun he was packing. "Now, I gotta have a private confab with this high-falutin' gal. Peg, you and Dobie and Windy go ride herd on Old Hike Dale fer half a hour, then come back here."

"Whatcha want done with that double crosser?" Peg asked, wagging his head at Lee Bridges.

"Chuck him and Crapes there into the kitchen. I'll settle with him after I git through with Kala and her old man," came the harsh response.

Lee was forthwith hustled into the lean-to adjoining the main room of the cabin by the three husky gunmen. Windy, to show his disdain for Lee, thrust out his foot and tripped him, at the same time giving a vigorous push which landed him with a crash against the partition between the two rooms. The body of the old mule-skinner was brought in next and rolled close to Lee's side.

"They'll be two stiffs in here afore Jib gits done with you," sneered Peg, looking over his shoulder as he stumped out of the kitchen and shut the door with a bang.

Lee's ear was within an inch of the thin board partition, which scarcely muffled the sounds in the next room. He plainly heard the scuffing of boots as the trio crossed the floor. Jib Stoney's voice penetrated the boards distinctly.

"Wait a shift till I separates the gal from that thar whip," he said.

"A sample of your gallant courage—Jib Stoney, calling on three brutes to pick on one girl!" Kala's retort rang out defiantly, immediately followed by the sharp cracking of her whiplash.

Came yelps of pain from more than one of the bullies, more scuffing of feet, and a muttered exclamation from Jib:

"Lay off, boys. Here, gimme that whip, Windy! Now beat it, all of you, and don't let none of Old Hike's gang sneak up on us!"

Lee heard the thump of boots die out of the cabin, then the slamming of the outer door, and after that the retreating drumming of hoofs as the trio rode back to the forks of Rattletrap Creek.

There was silence in the next room. Lee carefully pulled himself to his knees and pressed his ear against the partition. He imagined that he could hear the stifled breathing of both Stoney and Kala Dale. The suspense was soon broken by Jib's rumbling words:

"I got you and your old man whar

I wants you, Kala. Here—none o' that!" Lee wrenched at the rope which bound his wrists, when the sounds of a tussle dinned in his ears. But he was too well tied to free himself by jerking at the knots, so knelt there in a helpless frenzy till the noises abated.

"Don't try none of them wild-cat tricks on me no more. I'll give you a dose of your own whip medicine 'less you set still," the hateful voice continued. "Rattletrap Valley's mine, understand? Your old man puts his John Henry on the papers—git me, Kala?"

"He'll never sell to you, and you know it, Jib Stoney," she said.

"Not if I holds you prisoner till he does?" Stoney threatened.

"You wouldn't dare," Kala's voice shook, and Lee again attempted to pry his hands out of the tightly knotted ropes.

"You oughta know me by now, Kala. What I wants I gits, and Hike Dale ain't goin' to make me wait much longer for my reservoir site—not with what I'm holdin' over him this time." There was a gloating twang to Stoney's words.

"Coward!" was the girl's brief, scornful retort, and then she held her tongue.

"You could've saved all this fuss and fightin' if you'd married me a coupla years back, Kala; but I ain't stuck on gittin' tied up to a gal, which strangles men to death by this here whip."

"Oh, you lying beast," cried the girl.

"Huh, I got witnesses to swear that it was your whip wrapped round Sandy Crapes' neck," taunted Stoney cruelly.

"I lost my whip after I saw you yesterday. Somebody else found it——" Kala began.

"Tell that to a jedge and jury and see if they'll swallow it!"

"They wouldn't believe a word that you said even under oath," the girl retorted.

"Think not?" Stoney said sneeringly. "Waal, s'posin' you writes a little note so's I can give it to your dad. Say in it fer him to sell me Rattletrap Valley er he never sees you again. That's straight goods, Kala. Make up your mind quick—I hear the boys comin' back."

"I shan't—not if you starve me to death," protested the girl.

"Which is what I'll do, er worse, if Old Hike don't kick through. I'm gittin' sick of hagglin' fer what I wants. If you don't write it I'll tell him they's jest one way to set you loose, alive, you ornery little catamount!" Stoney went on.

Lee cringed at these taunting, bullying threats. He swung around on his knees to inspect the lean-to kitchen. There was a door in the rear wall. If he hoped to escape and be of any assistance to the girl, he must try for it before that trio of killers returned to the cabin. He found that he could inch forward on his knees. He was compelled to roll over the stark body of poor old Sandy Crapes. In doing so, the thought flashed through his mind that there was something strange about the deal between Crapes and Stoney. If Sandy had sold all water rights to Jib Stoney, why was Stoney so anxious to force Hike Dale into selling him Rattletrap Valley when he could be within the law and shut off the water, thus drying up the desired reservoir site?

The thought persisted as Lee, bound hand and foot, kept on rolling over till he reached the closed door. By using his elbow as a lever, he managed to prop himself upright against the wall. The door was fastened by a wooden bar which he lifted with his teeth, and the door swung half open.

Lee scanned the granite bluffs bulking less than two hundred feet to the rear of the cabin. Quaking aspens clustered at the foot of the bluffs, offering shelter for him if he could cover the intervening open space without being discovered. Lee paused on the threshold, peering back into the kitchen.

He hated the idea of deserting the girl, but, roped as he was and with no weapons, he could give her no assistance. He heard the thudding of hoofs. There wasn't time even to attempt to cut the knots which hobbled his ankles before the arrival of that relentless trio of killers. Lee berated himself for not having slipped out a half hour ago. Fortunately the cabin stood between him and the oncoming horsemen. He started hopping, crow fashion, over the open meadow that he must cross before gaining the grove of quaking aspens. The clumpety-clump of the fast approaching trio sent a chill racing up and down his spine; but he didn't dare look over his shoulder. If one of them chanced to swerve from a direct course to the cabin, Lee would be discovered and shot down with no more mercy than would be shown a skulking coyote.

He'd covered half the distance to the quaking aspens, hopping with all his strength and agility. Another hundred feet and he'd be concealed among the thickly-growing trees. His eyes were on his goal, and a thrill of victory surged through his breast when he suddenly plunged, face down with a terrific jolt, on the cropped turf of the open meadow.

CHAPTER VII.

SPECK'S GUNS.

LEE lay prone upon his stomach—his mouth and nose buried in the short grass, the breath knocked out of his body. The jarring fall had partially stunned him; his first panicky thought was that a bullet from the enemy had stopped his flight; but he felt no effects of a wound, and was conscious only of a thorough shaking up from the fall. Very cautiously he raised his head and craned his neck.

He experienced a sense of relief. Stoney's gang weren't swooping after him. The cause of his fall was a gnarled root which had tripped his bound feet. Lee filled his lungs with deep breaths, then, fearful that he'd be spotted if he arose to his feet, rolled over and over on the grass and finally reached the outer fringe of the quaking aspen grove.

Bracing his back against the bole of a tree, he slowly lifted himself upright. A plan formulated itself in this straining process. He'd hop down through the trees, lining the course of Rattletrap Creek, and locate Hike Dale. It would be a case of the halt and blind helping each other; but Lee knew that he could set Dale free by loosening the knots with his teeth. Then Old Hike could cut the ropes binding his own hands. With that scheme goading him onward, Lee hopped away from that first tree, intent upon getting to the bank of the creek.

Again he almost stumbled, but from an entirely different cause than that of his first jarring spill. He blinked down at his feet, choking back a shout of elation. He had stepped on a dragging end of rope—the rope which had been twisted so tightly around his ankles! It had been jerked loose in that contact with the projecting root which had tripped him out on the meadow. Wriggling his feet apart, playing them this way and that, Lee soon was foot loose. It was an exhilarating sensation and, crouching low among the thickets of aspen, he sprinted onward, following the crooked course of the creek which skirted the open meadow and took him below the cabin, nearer and nearer to the bulkhead where Stoney's men had snubbed Old Hike Dale.

The grove of trees thinned to scattering trunks, with just an occasional clump of willows to shield him from view of the cabin. He took advantage of a mule grazing in the same direction and kept moving with it, keeping on the safe side till the animal became

frightened and trotted off across the fields. Lee ducked into the bed of a branching stream, and was compelled to swing off the main creek, since it was bereft of protecting willows and flowed directly in sight of the ranch buildings.

A shout winged discordantly from the cabin. They had learned of his escape! Peeking over the brink of the shallow stream bed, Lee saw mounted men galloping in a fan-shape formation toward the granite bluffs behind the cabin. He knew that he'd left no footprints in the grass and but a faint trail through the grove of aspens; but he didn't dare lose a second in watching Stoney's assassins hunt for his trail. Bending low, he sprinted on till he came to a deeper wash eroded in the meadow. The detour had taken him farther away from the bulkhead, but he was now out of visual range of the mule-skinner's cabin. And keeping the higher ground between him and his pursuers, Lee sped on as fast as he could.

Topping a grassy knoll, he found that he was above the forks of the creek. Looking more closely, he saw Hike Dale, with feet snubbed to an upright post, lying in the lee of the bulkhead. A hasty survey of the meadow, and Lee dipped below the mound. Two of Stoney's men were quirting their ponies toward the bulkhead. Impossible for Lee to beat them to Dale. Thwarted and disheartened, Lee turned and fled for the brush and rocks on higher ground. It was hard, handicapped as he was by tightly-bound wrists. His escape would result in no good to himself or Kala Dale, if he couldn't shed those crippling fetters. And where could he go for help? Hike Dale's men believed him to be one of Stoney's hired killers: Stoney's gang was hunting him down as a traitor and spy.

Lee stole into the thickets of manzanita, carpeting the sloping side of a small cañon to the west of the bulkhead. He was close enough to hear the burring of angry voices, but couldn't make out what the two men were saying to Dale. Better to get as far away as possible lest the man hunters take a notion to search this cañon, too, so, with his hopes at lowest ebb, Lee hunched through the brush, pausing to look about him when the sound of the voices abated.

The crackling of a dry twig centered his attention upon a spot in the bottom of the gully. Something was moving cautiously through the buckbrush—Lee couldn't see whether it was a berry-hunting bear or a man crawling on all fours. If a man, to which faction did he belong—Stoney's or Dale's? The thing crept into sight in a gap in the brush and revealed itself as a man. He twisted his head, affording Lee a glimpse of his features.

"Speck!" The freckle-faced, small-eyed cowboy who had spoken of killing men as though it meant nothing more to him than rounding up stray cattle! But Peg had reported Speck killed by one of Dale's crew! Of course Peg had been mistaken—probably had seen Speck shot off his pony, and had jumped to conclusions. Wounded the cowboy certainly was. But even at that, he was less helpless than Lee, had the use of his hands, and was carrying a brace of guns.

"Why——" Lee's eyes kindled with fresh hope. He stood up so that his head and shoulders appeared above the tangle of manzanita, puckered his lips, and whistled softly.

Speck instantly flattened full length beneath the buckbrush, but Lee called to him assuringly:

"Hey, Speck—it's Bridges, Stoney's new ditch tender!" He slipped down the rough side of the gully, careful not to dislodge a stone or step on a brittle branch. He had to take a chance that Speck knew nothing of what had occurred there in Sandy Crapes' cabin.

Speck had been abandoned for dead before that had happened.

"Halt!" Speck commanded.

Lee stopped in his tracks, his eyes blinking into the little black hole of a six-gun's muzzle. His heart skipped a beat. This was the finish of his foolhardy experiment. Peg, Windy and Dobie had talked with Speck, when they had ridden down to see if Hike Dale was still safely snubbed to the bulkhead. Speck knew why his hands were tied behind his back.

"What you doin' here?" Speck whispered hoarsely when Lee had expected him to shoot. It gave him renewed hope.

"Same thing that you're doing, Speck—hiding from the enemy," answered Lee truthfully.

"They're after us, huh? I heard 'em comin'! Did they do fer Jib and the others, too?" The six-gun was lowered, and Lee ducked in beneath the ambush where Speck lay concealed.

"Can't swear to that Look, they roped me for fair. You bad hurt, Speck?" Lee asked.

"Plugged through the hip. Hurts awful. Can't use my right laig. Rotten luck, but I got one of Dale's ugly hombres, curse 'em all. How come they to stampede Peg and Dobie and Windy?" Speck asked.

"They sneaked up and caught me in the cabin," replied Lee with certain mental reservations. "Cut these ropes, Speck. No tellin' when they might ride up and shoot us up." Lee now assumed that Speck had no suspicions of just how he stood with Jib Stoney. And his assumption was correct, for Speck fished a knife out of his pocket and, with suppressed groans, slashed at the ropes.

"Wowie, but that feels great," said Lee, rubbing his hands together briskly to start the circulation, his mind working alertly as he took stock of the cowboy's well-filled cartridge belt and the brace of six-guns protruding from the holsters. He simply had to get those guns. In a way, it wasn't the square thing to do by Speck, considering that he had freed Lee's wrists. But this wasn't a situation where the principle of the affair could be whittled down to fine points. Speck wouldn't have hesitated a moment in shooting him had he guessed that Jib Stoney had ordered those ropes knotted around his wrists. Lee's sole interest was for Kala Dale, not for one of Stoney's murderous crooks. This was war to the death, and he was pitted against an unscrupulous gang. Mercy would be shown on neither side.

"How come they to tie you up 'stead o' shootin' you, Bridges?" Speck asked.

"Search me. Figgered on stringing me up later, maybe," Lee juickly replied.

"Like 'em, the low-down hounds. Say—I—I'm played plumb out. Laig's givin' me trouble. H-here—take my guns—you'll have to fight fer both of us—Bridges——" Speck's voice died away in a groan. There was a certain amount of gameness in this hard-bitten cow hand.

Lee unbuckled the belt and strapped it around his own sinewy waist, shifting the holsters and pulled out the guns, examining them to see that the chambers were loaded and everything in slick working order. He started down the gully, but a twinge of conscience drew him back. There was a trickle of water in the bed of the gulch. Saturating his own and Speck's kerchiefs, he dressed the shattered hip as best he could, made a pillow of his coat, and placed it beneath Speck's head.

That was all he could do just then, but later—well, there was Kala Dale's rescue to consider first. Even if he weren't successful in that, there'd surely be some way to send help to the mortally wounded Speck.

When tied hand and foot, Lee had prayed for just one thing—to be freed of the ropes. That prayer had been more than answered, for not only was he now unfettered but armed with a brace of guns.

But in spite of this, the problem of liberating Kala Dale from the toils of Jib Stoney had yet to be solved. It was a case of one man against four hardened killers. He didn't stand one chance in a thousand in an open fight with Stoney's gang. Lee did think of rushing over to Rattletrap Valley and marshaling the beaten crew of Old Hike Dale for another attack. He couldn't understand why they had stampeded. Surely he hadn't misjudged the caliber of Dale's men as he watched them line up alongside their courageous old leader early that morning. There was a deep mystery surrounding the matter which was quite beyond his ken.

He'd have to resort to strategy of some sort, for the more he thought of Kala's awful predicament, the more eager he became to hurry to her side. But what should he do? Lee racked his brain as he stealthily picked his way down the gulch. He had found out from a survey of his surroundings that it emptied near the forks of Rattletrap Creek.

He came within view of the bulkhead. Hike Dale had been removed. Floating down on the faint breeze, Lee imagined that he heard human voices. Looking up the creek, he saw Stoney's mounted men—one of the horses carrying double. They were taking Kala's father to the cabin, no doubt, for the purpose of forcing him into signing over Rattletrap Valley to Jib Stoney. If he refused—but he wouldn't, not when Kala's fate hung in the balance. And even if Dale did agree to Stoney's harsh terms, Stoney wasn't to be trusted, now that he had the girl in his power.

CHAPTER VIII.

STRATEGY.

THE urge to help Kala Dale drew Lee toward Sandy Crapes' cabin. He cast out of his mind all ideas of getting assistance from Old Hike's crew. In the first place, he didn't know where to find them and would lose valuable time in trying to locate them. Secondly, he suspected that they might have been intimidated or else bought off by Stoney. If they were loyal to Dale, they would put no trust in the man whom they had seen in Stoney's company. It bothered Lee—what had become of them, for they hadn't impressed him as being cowards or quitters.

He proceeded cautiously, retracing his steps between the hillocks of the meadow till he came to the scattering willows and quaking aspens lining Rattletrap Creek. He slipped from tree to tree, working toward the foot of the granite bluff. That was the nearest sheltered spot within pistol range of the cabin. He stopped once to count the saddled ponies standing in an irregular row in front of the cabin. There were five of them, and he mentally checked off the owners of those that he recognized: Jib Stoney's, his own roan cow pony, the sorrel belonging to Kala, and two others besides. There should be another horse in the bunch if all three of Stoney's gang were in the cabin.

"One of them's still trying to round me up," concluded Lee. He hadn't recognized the two men who had galloped down to the bulkhead and carried Hike Dale back to the cabin. Which one was trailing him? The evil-tongued Peg, Windy who twirled his six-guns so menacingly, or young Dobie with the twisted smile?

"Lucky that they ain't all after me," said Lee to himself, now doubly on his guard as he padded noiselessly on

through the thickening grove of aspens skirting the foot of the bluffs.

He could no longer see the front of the cabin, but was nearing the spot where, bound hand and foot, he had rolled from the open meadow into the shelter of the tree nearest the door in the lean-to kitchen. How utterly helpless he had been just a brief time ago! Now he was armed with a pair of six-guns and a belt stocked with cartridges. By comparison, he felt that he could stand off twenty men if he were properly ambushed. He wanted to get as close to the rear of the cabin as possible, so dropped to his hands and knees and crept toward the edge of the meadow. A coiled object in the grass a few feet ahead of him sent a slight chill up and down his spine. It resembled a snake, but a second look showed it to be the rope which had confined his ankles. Evidently none of his pursuers had found it, and even yet were at a loss to know which way he had gone after penetrating the grove of trees.

Lee crawled on and picked up the six feet of smoothly worn manila. Its size and length indicated that it had been used as a halter rope. But his examination of the rope was purely mechanical, for Lee was thinking hard of how he could stage a successful attack upon Stoney and his killers while they were gathered under the roof of Crapes' cabin.

The faint thudding of hoofs startled him. Dropping the rope, his fingers closed over the butts of the six-guns slung low over his hips. A quick survey of the meadow disclosed no visible horseman. Then he made a keener concentration, turning his head and peering through the slim, silvery trunks of the aspens in the opposite direction from which he had stolen up the creek. The clatter of hoofs came nearer. From the rhythmic sounds, Lee believed that there was but one pony approaching. He wriggled into a sparse bed of bracken growing at the base of a tree. It wasn't sufficient, though, to conceal a calf. And the crackling of branches denoted that the mounted man was headed directly toward this particular spot. He'd be discovered within a few moments, but before that happened, Lee hit upon a daring scheme. A safer way for this immediate encounter, should the oncoming party be one of Stoney's gang, would be for Lee to lie in wait till he was within range, then shoot to kill before his victim had a chance to draw. But the shooting would carry the alarm to those in the cabin, bringing Stoney and his remaining men upon the scene in a bunch. This other way was worthy of a trial, though the risk was even greater.

Lee worked hastily, twining the rope around his ankles loosely, then unbuckling Speck's cartridge belt and hiding it under the bracken. Trampling the ferns down at the base of the tree so that the rope coiled around his legs showed, Lee braced his back against the slender sapling, placing both hands behind him as though they were still fettered—a gun gripped in each. He experienced a frightened feeling, wondering if the trick would work.

The following seconds were fraught with further misgivings as the sound of the pony's hoofs became louder and louder. With a great crackling of twigs, the horseman rode from behind the next group of trees.

"Whoa!" Lee heard the low command and winced when he saw young Dobie squat in his saddle—a gun flashing from his holster, his small eyes fixed sharply upon the escaped prisoner.

Lee didn't move a muscle. He knew that if he did, Dobie's finger would press the trigger and the game would be up. In that fleeting instant he doubted the wisdom of this piece of strategy. Better call it utter foolish-

ness instead of a clever ruse. Stoney had most likely issued orders to shoot him on sight, Lee thought, after witnessing the rapid drawing of Dobies' gun. But still the cowboy didn't fire. His rigid pose relaxed, a mocking grin spread over the youthful but hardened features.

"Well, if this ain't good!" There was a nasal twang to the exclamation. Dobie spurred his pony nearer, slouched back in his saddle, and ran his sharp little eyes from the rope twisted around Lee's legs to the way that his arms were cramped behind his back. "Didn't hobble outa sight o' the cabin!" he went on. "Well, bein' as how I done the tyin', I knowed that you couldn't a slunk outa them knots. Smart trick, huh, layin' low and lettin' me ride all over after you? They's two can play at smart tricks, Bridges." Young Dobie sheathed his gun and, with a nasty lift of his twisted lip, deliberately shook out his reata. "Savvy what I'm gonna do to you?" he asked.

Lee, standing stock still, pretended utter helplessness. He pleaded in a quavering voice: "You're not going to rope me, Dobie?"

"Right the first guess," sneered Dobie in nasal accents. "I'll teach you not to send a guy wild-goosin' up and down and through these cussed trees looking fer you. Quickest and easiest way to git you back is to lass you and drag you thar." He was twirling the loop of the reata as he spoke. "If you're alive when I turns you over to Stoney, he'll git a big kick outa pluggin' you full o' holes. Jest step clear o' that tree," he began.

Lee obeyed with alacrity—both hands leaping from behind him as he did so—and young Dobie, in blank confusion, fumbled his rope, the coils snagging in the branches of the nearest tree.

"Up with your hands, Dobie!" Lee imitated the nasal drawl of the sullen cowboy. He advanced with his guns ready to spit forth deadly bullets at the faintest sign of Dobie's disregarding the command.

"You—you are a smart one, and no mistake," sputtered Dobie, sticking up both hands meekly.

"Sling your leg over the horn and git off. Keep your hands elevated," said Lee, keenly on the alert.

Dobie obeyed and, thrusting one gun under the belt of his chaps, Lee disarmed the cowboy. "Now march back into the woods! Snap it up, Dobie, and remember that I'm right on your heels with a pair of guns," he commanded.

Lee looped the pony's reins over his left arm and kept close behind his prisoner, halting him when the trees completely screened them from the cabin. He let the reins drag on the ground and issued further instructions, prodding Dobie occasionally with the muzzle of the gun for speedy results.

In less than ten minutes, Lee Bridges was wearing young Dobie's orange-dyed chaps, his rakishly dented and slanted sombrero, and had his purple kerchief knotted around his neck. Dobie had a vivid taste in personal adornment and, garbed in Lee's less ornate chaps, he seemed to have shed his bold front as well as his loud clothes. At least, he gave Lee very little trouble when the latter tied him to a tree with the reata with which Dobie had threatened to drag Lee back into Stoney's clutches. To make sure that his securely anchored victim would hold his tongue, Lee gagged him with his own blue flannel shirt.

Then, after a final inspection of his captive's fastenings, Lee mounted Dobie's pony, a strikingly marked pinto, as conspicuous as its owner's outer garments, and pointed its head in the direction of Sandy Crapes' cabin. Even at a short distance, the masquerade was perfect. Dobie's own cronies couldn't fail to recognize those luridly

dyed chaps, the colorful bandanna, and that cockily slanted sombrero. The pinto pony strengthened the transformation and Lee, though he realized that it was too early in the game to boast, was, nevertheless, elated over these first two steps in his scheme to help Kala Dale. The securing of Speck's guns and cartridge belt was sheer luck; but this last stunt was the fruit of his own wits. His elation slumped when he thought of the next step in his ruse. He'd have to put it through—there must be no doubting the outcome or else the jig was up.

Guiding the pinto past the aspens, edging the meadow, Lee yanked the brim of Dobie's sombrero clear to his eyebrows, let out a shrill "yi-yip," and galloped boldly out into the open.

The kitchen door flew open and Lee saw Windy peering out, with Peg teetering on his uneven legs, crowding past him.

"Hop your nags and head him off! He's loose and runnin' down the crik!" Lee said, imitating Dobie's nasal twang which he had practiced while directing the masquerade stunt, yelled the command, pointing a six-gun in the general direction of the forks of Rattletrap Creek.

Lee didn't dare ride any nearer the cabin, for, if his voice hadn't betrayed him, another fifty feet would reveal his identity. He reined the pinto away from the kitchen door, taking a slanting course toward the bend in the creek to the west of the cabin, yelling and firing off his gun as though hot on the trail of the escaped prisoner.

There was a brief consultation between Windy and Peg. Then Windy sprang out of the doorway and bolted around the corner of the cabin, Peg hopping after him at a surprisingly fast clip. Out of the corner of his eye Lee saw them clamber into their saddles and dash across the meadow ahead of him. He muttered broken words of thanksgiving under his breath. His ruse had worked. Windy and Peg, hoping, no doubt, to win the praise of their devilish master, were plying quirt and spur in a furious race to capture the fugitive, Lee Bridges!

Lee swung the pinto's nose toward the cabin, but not so abruptly as to divert the attention of Stoney's hired killers. This was the opportunity he had prayed for, to get the cabin cleared of all of the enemy saving Jib Stoney himself. But he knew that the most dangerous part of his maneuver was yet to be accomplished. The decisive blow remained to be struck. If Stoney came to the kitchen door and recognized him, he'd shoot to kill.

Lee slowed the pinto to a trot, having assured himself that Windy and Peg were too intent upon running their supposed victim to earth to have noticed his deflection. Stoney hadn't appeared in the doorway. And Lee suspected that he was too occupied in bullying Kala and her father.

Only fifty feet to go and, in his eagerness, he clapped spurs to the pony's flanks. It sprang forward and the distance was rapidly eaten up. Ten more feet, and Lee loosened the toes of his boots in the stirrups, ready to jump off and bolt through the lean-to door.

Suddenly a figure bulked in the opening. Lee was conscious of murky black eyes glaring up at him. He saw the startled flash of recognition distend the pupils into menacing pools. A movement of Stoney's hand registered on Lee's brain—the man was dipping for his gun.

In that zipping second, Lee changed his mind about leaping off the pinto's back. He couldn't draw his own gun as he hurled out of the saddle. So, flattening himself over the saddle, he spurred the horse head-on, straight for Jib Stoney.

A spurt of fire nearly blinded Lee. Simultaneously with the report of the

gun came the crashing of splintered wood as the pinto's shoulder ripped the lean-to door off its hinges.

CHAPTER IX.

BESIEGED.

THE pinto catapulted between the jambs of the door, Lee clinging tightly to the saddle. He felt the casing wrench at his knee, heard the tearing of cloth; and a leg of young Dobie's orange-hued chaps was rent from hip to ankle. The clump and clatter of iron-shod hoofs on the resounding planks set up a deafening racket as the frightened animal milled around the room.

Lee slid off the pony's back, keeping the animal between himself and Jib Stoney, who had been temporarily pinned against the wall by the impact of the unhinged door. Stoney crouched behind the broken door, and the second that Lee's boots hit the floor a bullet pinged between his legs. Lee shot from under the pinto's neck, and splinters flew from the pine boards.

Another round of shots from each man filled the small lean-to with an awful din. The pinto screamed, reared madly, its head smashing hard against the thinly thatched roof. Down came its front hoofs, pounding the floor in a panic. Next it began kicking, its heels thrashing wildly about. Lee was crowded too close to the pony to protect himself from the flying hoofs. He was thrown clear against the wall opposite the doorway. The pony wheeled and bolted for the open, dislodging the loosened door in its hectic exit. Lee lay in a groggy heap, but the instinct for self-preservation quickly cleared his brain.

The gun had been knocked out of his hand. He saw it lying on the floor near a plank which had been caved in by the pony's weight. Just beyond the gun, Jib Stoney was swaying as though dazed. Lee wondered, vaguely, if Stoney had been injured by the pinto's frenzied spurt for liberty, or whether one of his two bullets had found its mark. With a cautious eye on his enemy, Lee felt for Speck's second gun. It was gone, jerked from the holster in that squeezing charge through the narrow doorway. Stoney seemed less shaky on his legs—was, in fact, staring at him. And Lee tensed his muscles preparatory for a quick recovery of the gun on the floor. He shifted his body slightly, and Stoney stiffened his neck—his right hand leaping from his side.

"You sneakin' varmint!" Stoney shouted.

Lee inwardly groaned. This was the end of the fight, in fact, of his life, so rioted his thoughts as he stared, wide eyed, into the little black hole of Stoney's gun barrel. His strategy and his urge to help Kala Dale had gained him nothing but defeat—a dog's death—for Stoney was gloating over this chance to wreak his vengeance.

"You'd double cross me, huh?" He lurched a step nearer to Lee. "You'd oughta knowed that I allus git what I wants," he added.

"Yes?" Lee, though believing that he was to be murdered the next instant, refused to beg for mercy. He so loathed Stoney that he didn't fear such a death as much as he resented it. "And *how* do you get what you want, Stoney?" he asked.

"Shut your trap—sneak, traitor! How'd you git them duds offn Dobie?" Stoney demanded.

"Maybe you'd like to know how I got the guns off Speck, too!" returned Lee, one eye on the six-gun within three feet of Stoney's boots. "Who untied you?" hoarsely demanded Stoney, furiously puzzled.

"One of your brave and trusted men," jeered Lee. "Come, why don't you murder me? I'm unarmed and at your mercy, same as Sandy Crapes

was." He voiced the suspicion which had been lurking in his breast ever since he had rolled over Sandy's dead body and hobbled out of the lean-to.

"Fool—don't you dare! Bah," Stoney's murky eyes burned with ugly gleams. "Whatcha mean—'same's Sandy Crapes?'" he yelled.

"I mean that you killed Sandy Crapes!" shouted Lee.

"Liar! It was that girl in thar done fer Crapes—stranglin' him with her whip and you knows it."

"It was you, and I know why," Lee's brain was piecing together clews which convinced him that Stoney was the murderer. Kala was in the next room. He raised his voice, wanting her to hear the evidence that he had against Stoney. "You sneaked up here last night——"

But Stoney's big body bulked forward, he held the sight of his gun squarely upon Lee's heart. "You croaks fer that, liar!" he said. Murder glinted in his menacing eyes.

A swirling something streaked through the air, darting from the doorway opening into the main room of the cabin. It whistled over Lee's head with the whining ping of a bullet. He imagined that it was a bullet, that Stoney had shot; that this was the end. The leaden missile had pierced his heart, numbed his nerves—it couldn't be otherwise, so ran Lee's conjectures.

He couldn't believe his eyes when he saw the gun, plucked from Stoney's fist, go spinning halfway across the room, hitting the planks with a rattling thud.

A twist of his head and the miracle was explained. Kala Dale stood in the connecting doorway—the whipstock poised in her flexible wrist, her slender figure held taut as she threatened Stoney with that deadly whip. It was her whiplash which had snatched the gun out of Stoney's fingers; her presence of mind and remarkable skill with the whip which had saved Lee's life.

It had all happened with such incredible swiftness and at a moment when his death seemed so certain, that Lee's brain refused to function at once. He gazed wonderingly at the girl. He couldn't doubt her reality after that first vivid instant. She presented a splendid picture of dauntless courage and young loveliness. Furthermore, the girl had saved his life. Did this mean that she trusted him? Lee, puzzled over that possibility, finally concluding that Kala Dale understood that he was fighting for her interests, not against them.

And if she believed that, why—he couldn't cringe there on the floor and not prove to her that she was justified. He wouldn't let her hold Stoney at bay while he daydreamed like a helpless lout! Lee's torpor vanished. He sprang to his feet and charged Stoney with the tactics of a whirlwind prize fighter.

Kala Dale believed in him—that thought alone tripled his strength, and fired his determination to conquer this human beast who had bullied and tortured her.

Stoney, dodging the blows that rained upon his face, his neck, and his body, stooped to pick up the gun lying near the caved-in plank. Lee threw his whole weight back of his right-arm punch, catching Stoney directly behind the jawbone. The man went down limply as a felled ox, and Lee skipped around him and recovered the gun, then stood over the bully for several seconds. But Stoney showed no signs of life. That pile-driver blow had knocked him completely out.

Lee lifted his head and over the hulk of Stoney's body, looked deep into the black-lashed hazel eyes of Kala Dale. The girl's pale lips trembled—was she about to speak to him? Would she tell him that she didn't hate him, ask him for further help? Lee hoped to hear such words.

"What you said," she *was* speaking to him and Lee listened eagerly. "About his killing Sandy? What makes you think that?"

Why did he think it? Lee asked himself the question as he groped for words to explain his suspicion. It was more of a hunch than a statement that he could prove with facts. But he didn't have a chance to give her a detailed account of the bits of evidence which had piled up against Jib Stoney.

For Kala cast a startled glance over her shoulder, then spoke in a tragic whisper:

"They're coming back—those fiends are returning!" She ran into the main room of the cabin.

Lee followed her, gathering up Jib Stoney's gun as he crossed the puncheon planks. Old Hike Dale was propped up on a stool drawn up to the wrecked table. His gray head was resting on the crook of his elbow, his other arm sprawled across the table. There were papers and a bottle of ink littering the table. A pen was loosely clutched between Dale's limp fingers.

Kala stopped at her father's side and faced Lee, the hazel eyes darkening fiercely.

"They tortured dad, the beasts!" Her voice was husky with emotion. "Stoney's worse than a savage. He even kept me tied for a time. It was cruel—cruel. They've nearly killed father. He wouldn't sign the deed to Rattletrap Valley when they threatened to kill him, but"—and here the girl's voice choked with tears—"Stoney swore that he'd take his spite out on me and—and then—dad signed it, and it's killing him." She turned as though to reënter the lean-to. "Stoney has the paper. I'll get it—I've got to have it!" she said.

"Sure you have," vowed Lee Bridges, examining the guns, one after the other, and reloading them when he found that they were in working shape.

The rapid beat of hoofs grew louder and Kala hesitated, then stepped close to Lee.

"Give me a gun! We'll fight together!" she said.

"No; you guard Stoney with your whip," he said, trying to encourage her by a reassuring nod of the head, as he hastened to the front door and peered out.

Peg and Windy were quirting their ponies across the meadow. When they galloped within one hundred feet of the cabin, Lee opened fire, working both guns. The volleying sounded like the fusillade from a machine gun.

Yelling with the shrill whoops of wild Indians, the two desperadoes swung to the sides of their saddles, returning the fire by shooting from under their ponies' necks as they circled the cabin.

Lee shook his head furiously. He'd missed the fiends, flunked getting either one of them. He broke the guns and deftly filled the chambers again. But it was a baffling disappointment not to have succeeded in that first scrimmage. Now, Peg and Windy would keep out of pistol range, and they'd lay siege to the cabin. He peered out of the door again, but saw neither of the mounted ponies.

A call from the lean-to rang in his ears:

"Out here—quick! They're headed this way!"

Lee bounded through the doorway, leaping over the hulking body of Jib Stoney as he joined Kala Dale who stood guard at the rear door of the cabin.

CHAPTER X.

SANDY'S RIFLE.

WINDY and Peg were riding at full speed straight for the lean-to doorway. There was no way to barricade it, since the door had been ripped off its hinges. But Lee didn't think of

that as he emptied the chambers of the first six-gun at the charging twain. The volley checked the assault, and again the wily pair ducked on the safe side of their ponies, shooting, Indian fashion, as they swung off at a tangent. Bullets clipped through the opening and plunked against the log walls of the kitchen.

They galloped around the corner of the cabin and Lee leaped back to the front door, shooting at them as they drew off in a wider circle. They halted out in the meadow, beyond pistol range, and held a consultation. Lee reloaded as he watched them. Finally Peg struck off toward the bluffs behind the cabin, Windy remaining out in front.

Lee slipped out into the lean-to, and saw Peg disappear among the grove of aspens. Immediately he guessed what Peg's errand involved. Lee hurriedly looked for the second of Speck's guns, which had been jerked out of the holster when the pinto catapulted through the narrow doorway. He found it and handed it to the girl.

"Kala, we're up against a tough deal," he told her. "Peg's rode up there in the woods where I left Dobie tied to a tree. There'll be three of 'em after us pretty pronto. You'd better guard the front door. I'll stay here." A movement from Stoney added to the gravity of the case. "I'd oughta put an end to him right now. He deserves it, the bully." Lee pointed his gun at the man who had precipitated all this miserable upheaval.

Kala's face paled. "I'm convinced that he murdered poor old Sandy," she said. "I want the law to deal with him, not us—if it can be managed." She went to a corner of the kitchen, pushed back a curtain of rough burlap, and rummaged among the contents of this makeshift closet. She unearthed a coil of rope and gave it to Lee. "Please tie him. Let's not soil our hands by killing such a beast," she added.

Lee was reluctantly carrying out her suggestions when Kala, who had taken a stand at the lean-to door, uttered an exclamation.

"You were right! Here comes Peg with Dobie!"

Lee yanked furiously at the ropes he had wrapped around Stoney's legs and arms, tying the knots all too hastily to insure a satisfactory job. But they'd serve their purpose, since Stoney seemed to have had all the combativeness knocked out of his system.

Watching the doors and two small windows in the opposite walls of the cabin, Lee witnessed the meeting between Peg and Dobie—riding double—and Windy. They were extremely cautious in keeping a safe distance from the cabin, while they planned their next attack. The council of war ended by Windy's remaining in his position, Peg's riding around and stationing himself at the rear, and Dobie's walking out to a point flanking the side of the cabin. It was a nerve-racking situation for Lee and the girl. Stoney's men seemed to have figured on torturing their trapped victims by suspended action. They deliberately held off storming the stronghold, rolled cigarette after cigarette, and calmly smoked them as they lolled in their saddles or lay on the grass.

"Lee, the sun has set," whispered Kala meaningly. "When it's dark, they'll swoop down on us!"

Lee had already guessed that this would be their cowardly maneuver.

"If I only had a rifle to pick 'em off with," he muttered, restraining the impulse to shoot at them with his six-guns, which would be wasting precious ammunition.

"A rifle? Why, Sandy always had a rifle. I wonder where he kept it?" The girl began to hunt through the two rooms of the cabin, rummaging beneath the bunks, in the cluttered corners of the main room, poking around in the curtained closet.

The shadows were lengthening. And blue jays were raucously chattering as they flew across the meadow, preparing to roost in the grove of aspens. The sound of crickets waxed louder as the evening star showed in the heavens. A cool breeze sprang out of the west, crooning around the corners of the little cabin. Sandy Crapes' mules began to file into the corrals, nosing and lipping at the empty feed racks.

And while Kala persisted in her hunt for the rifle, Lee didn't relax his vigilance at doors and windows. At times Kala stopped by her father's stool to stroke his shock of gray hair or to talk to him encouragingly. But Old Hike Dale, who had been brutally handled, didn't have sufficient spirit to lift his head from the table. He mumbled at infrequent intervals something about losing Rattletrap Valley, and Kala's being stolen by Jib Stoney.

The evening star twinkled brighter; myriads of stars dotted the sky. Lee nervously padded from door to window. This suspense was maddening. The figures of Peg, Windy and Dobie were fast becoming nothing more than blurred spots out on the meadow. At any moment now they might close in on the cabin.

"Lee, I've found it! The rifle! It was behind a loose board in the closet." Kala darted into the main room, brandishing a Winchester—the barrel gleaming even in the gloom of the room.

"Good for you," declared Lee, taking the gun and running his hand anticipatingly over the well-kept rifle. He pressed down the lever, and nodded his head in thanksgiving when he found that the magazine was filled.

"This'll scatter 'em," he muttered. Stepping to the front door, he steadied the rifle against the jamb, took careful aim at the dark blur, which he had reason to believe was Windy, and pressed the trigger.

The report of the rifle rang out sharply. It was answered by a yelp, whether of surprise or pain, Lee couldn't tell, for the granite bluffs took up the reverberations, and the little mountain meadow thrummed with repeated echoes. He rushed to the lean-to door, and drew bead upon that second dark object hovering out there in ghoulish patience. The rifle barked vindictively, and the object dwindled to a speck, then was swallowed up in the deeper gloom of the aspen trees. Lee swung over to the side window, and made out young Dobie streaking for the woods. Lee blazed away at the fleeting cowboy, saw him pitch headlong to the ground, and then lay so still that he lost sight of him.

He didn't shoot more than those three cartridges, nor had he shot merely to warn Windy, Peg and Dobie, but had drawn as close a bead as possible in the growing darkness. If he didn't get the best of them, they'd recapture Kala, and continue to torture Old Hike Dale.

"Did you hit them?" Kala Dale's whisper thrilled him. She had crept close to his side, and was scanning the meadow for a glimpse of the besieging trio.

"Can't swear to it, but I think that I got two of 'em," replied Lee. "We've got to get out of here soon's it gets darker. Our ponies are still out there in front."

"But there's dad. I shan't leave him," protested the girl.

"Of course not," affirmed Lee. "I'll bring Stoney's horse up here to the stoop, and we'll tie him into the saddle. Those men are apt to sneak up on us in the night."

"Yes; you are right, Lee," agreed Kala. "I know the trails by night as well as day. There's a short cut to our ranch. And they won't dare follow us home."

"But your men—why'd they throw

up the fight so quick? They didn't look like quitters to me. What do you reckon happened to 'em?" Lee asked.

"They're not quitters," said Kala decisively.

"But Peg claimed that the last he seen of 'em they was on the run for home."

"He lied. They've all been killed or terribly wounded. That's why they didn't come back to help us," Kala declared.

"I run across Speck. He cut me loose from the ropes and give me his guns, thinking that I was lined up on Stoney's side. He allowed he'd got one of your men, but said that the rest of 'em beat it," Lee explained.

"I still don't believe it," insisted Kala. "I know our men. They've been working for dad for years, and hate Stoney like poison. They've all been killed by his beastly savages."

"I'd rather believe that than what Stoney's men said about 'em," muttered Lee, more to himself than to the girl.

The frightened snort of a pony whistled through the door. Lee ran out in front of the cabin. The thudding of hoofs sent up an ominous racket. All that Lee could see of the ponies was fast fading blobs scooting off into the night. What had stampeded them? He peered into the shadows cast by the building, saw nothing, heard nothing. Strange that the ponies had bolted now, after standing calmly through the scrimmage and shooting of the past few hours.

"What scared 'em?" Lee turned in consternation to Kala Dale.

The girl was leaning out of the front door, clutching a six-gun in one hand and holding the stock of her whip in the other. She didn't answer Lee promptly, but kept on staring out into the darkness.

Lee suddenly had a hunch what had caused the panic among the ponies. He ran out into the lean-to. It was darker in the kitchen than in the main room. And he had to strike a match in order to inspect the place. When the yellow flame flickered and cast its wavering light over the bare puncheon planks, he knew that his hunch had been correct.

Sandy Crapes' body still lay huddled against the far wall of the lean-to partition; but Jib Stoney had escaped. There was nothing but a tangled coil of ropes strewn upon the floor where Stoney had lain immovable and apparently unconscious for hours.

CHAPTER XI.

JERRY, THE MASTIFF.

LEE rushed out to the lean-to door and made a fast round of the cabin. Stoney had gotten clear away. Useless to strike out across the meadows, for there wasn't a chance in a thousand that he'd hit on the right trail and overtake the tricky villain.

Lee reëntered the lean-to, dreading to break the news of this latest calamity to Kala. She'd suffered so much already, had gone through one horrible experience after another in the past twelve hours. And this last would be the hardest for her to bear; for, as Lee understood it, Jib Stoney still had in his possession that scrap of paper which gave him right and title to Rattletrap Valley. In a legal show-down the paper could be proven worthless, no doubt; but Lee knew how bitterly disappointed the girl would be if Jib got away with the paper, besides avoiding trial for the murder of Sandy Crapes.

But she wasn't a child. She wouldn't berate Lee, knowing that he had been in a terrific hurry when he had roped Stoney. Still, he should have kept an eye on his dangerous prisoner even in the midst of that hectic struggle in fighting off Peg and Windy and Dobie!

Kala hadn't moved from her post on the threshold of the front door of the cabin. Lee stopped in the middle of

the room and spoke to her gruffly to hide his own worry and self-disgust.

"I learned what stampeded the ponies," he said.

"So have I," she partially turned, the profile of her fine face dimly visible against the starlit night.

"I'm sorry he squirmed out of those ropes. I'd oughta tied 'em better, but I was rattled, all right," Lee went on.

"What do you mean?" she asked, facing him, her eyes shining excitedly.

"What do I mean?" He was puzzled at her question and manner. Hadn't she just admitted knowing that Stoney had frightened the horses. "Why, Stoney's escaped," he said.

"Stoney escaped! Oh!" Her cry was distressing. "Why didn't I get that paper! He's got the bill of sale to Rattletrap Valley. He shan't get away with it. I must have it."

Lee was more puzzled than ever about her first remark. "What'd you think stampeded the ponies?" he asked her.

"I know," she replied. "It was my dog—the one you saw down on the ditch path. He's trailed me here. I saw him over there in the shadow of the corral fence."

"Your dog—and he was trailing you?" Lee had forgotten all about the great, tawny mastiff in the press of the siege.

"Yes; brother to the one you killed." There was an accusing note in her voice. "The collar that you dropped on the floor—I picked it up and put two and two together."

"Yes; I did shoot your dog," confessed Lee. "I thought that it was a catamount—it'd been killing calves down on the Buckjump Ranch. If I hadn't got it, one of the other cowboys would've killed it. I read what was on the collar—that's why I came up here, to bring it back to you and tell you that I was sorry that I killed your pet dog, Kala."

"You're sorry," she said with a catch in her voice. "Oh, I've been foolishly fond of those dogs, Lee. They were tiny puppies when Sandy Crapes gave them to me—after their mother died. I raised them on a bottle. Tom and Jerry—that's what I named them. It was Tom you killed. He did go wild and ran away, but not till after Jib Stoney tried to shoot him. That's Jerry out there by the corral." She suddenly swayed against the door jamb. "Lee, Stoney's abused my dogs every chance he got—they both hated him. Jerry, particularly, seems to sense that Stoney's his deadly enemy. Oh, just yesterday, when you two were riding up the ditch, Jerry scented Stoney. That's how I knew that he was near. And now——" Kala peered out into the darkness.

Lee saw that her whole body was quivering, that the whipstock shook in her hands.

"Could the dog trail Stoney, Kala?" He asked the question tensely. "Can we run him down with your mastiff?"

"I'd be afraid to try it," cried Kala. "I know that Jerry's dangerous. He'd kill Stoney if he got half a chance. He's picked up his scent several times, but I've always managed to drive him off with my whip. Lee—the mastiff's not out there now! If he smells out Stoney's hiding place——" Kala crossed the threshold and glided toward the corral, Lee running by her side.

What followed seemed unreal to Lee Bridges: Kala's crooning talk, the soft whirring of her whiplash as she swung it over her head. She was trying to locate the great dog, bring him to heel. She was like an eerie little gypsy, weaving a spell over the savage dog lurking somewhere in the black shadows. But the mastiff had disappeared.

"You're sure Stoney's not hiding in the cabin?" Kala's fingers clutched at Lee's sleeve.

"I'm sure that he ain't. He's sneaking cross the field to find his men. Listen, Kala, wasn't he claiming that your mastiff was a coward—all for looks and no courage? Well, I hope that the dog does pick up his trail. It'd be proof of who was the bigger coward—Stoney or the dog. Besides, you know what'll happen if Stoney gets his men rounded up—he'll tackle us again. And how much mercy would he show us, answer me that?"

Kala shook her head; then called in a clear, carrying voice:

"Jerry! Jerry!"

Only the echoes floated back from the granite cliffs edging the meadow. She cracked her whip till the volleying reports sounded like the popping of pistols. When the echoes died to a lisping crackle, Lee and the girl started walking toward the cabin. Lee was uneasy. Even though there was a lull in the fighting, and peace seemed to be holding sway over this secluded little mountain meadow, hostilities might begin at any moment. He wasn't sure that he had put an end to any of Stoney's hired killers. And all of them might be surrounding the cabin, sneaking in the shadows of the doorway, ready to spring out upon them to finish the cowardly work that they had begun.

"I've always loved Sandy's ranch," Kala was speaking softly, sorrowfully. "And I loved poor old Sandy. He was such a kind, quaint old character. He taught me how to use this whip; gave it to me, Lee. I know he'd never willingly sell his water rights to Stoney. Stoney might have got Sandy to drinking, but even if he were dead drunk, Sandy wouldn't have sold unless he talked it over with me. And now he's dead—cruelly murdered, and that beast said that I strangled my very good old friend!"

"Nobody believed him," exclaimed Lee.

"But my whip? Who could have found it? I was in such a hurry to warn father of what Stoney threatened to do that I dropped the whip on the trail. I didn't miss it till this morning. Could Stoney have found it?" she asked.

"I'll swear Stoney came up here last night. He was sore as a goat 'count of Sandy's not showing up at his ranch. Sure he found your whip, Kala—and that clears up who murdered Sandy Crapes."

"But how can we prove it?" Kala's poignant question was caught up by an agonized scream. She sprang away from Lee, her whip hand poised aloft, her eyes turned toward the granite bluffs towering dimly against the northern sky.

The scream was repeated, more terrible than the first outcry.

"It's Stoney!" whispered Kala. "Come—Jerry's caught him." She fled past the cabin, on toward the aspens at the foot of the cliffs.

Lee ran after her, compelled to exert every muscle to overtake the fleet-footed, gypsylike daughter of Old Hike Dale. The human cries came at lessening intervals, but served to guide the man and girl over the starlit meadow.

"Jerry! Off with you! Get out of here!" Kala had spurted in advance of Lee just before they reached the fringe of trees.

The whiplash darted out, singing through the air in writhing coils which terminated in sharp reports. Again and again the girl cracked the whip as she bore down on an object crouched at the very edge of the open meadow.

Two shining balls of fire were turned toward Lee and Kala. There was a crackling and popping of the whiplash, and the mastiff, growling savagely, backed off from its prey. Lee had drawn both his guns, had them trained on the great dog as he kept pace with the girl. But it was the stinging whiplash which drove the animal farther

into the shadow of the trees, and permitted them to get between the groaning human figure and the enraged dog.

The man was whimpering pitifully. Lee knelt by his side and struck a match. In the flickering flame he recognized Jib Stoney, but had to wince and look away. The mastiff uttered a final growl when the match flared and sputtered. Kala lashed the dog cruelly, and it backed into the shelter of the aspens and slunk off in the darkness.

"I'm done fer—your yaller—hound—got me——"

The flame of the match was extinguished, and Lee didn't strike another, for what he had seen was too ghastly for Kala to witness.

"S-Sandy's will—in pocket—he wouldn't—sell——" Stoney went on.

"Yes—and then what, Stoney?" Lee, even though it seemed heartless to goad the dying man, realized that the greater urge was to clear Kala's good name. "Sandy wouldn't sell, so what did you do to him, Stoney?"

"W-what you seen—found Kala's whip—s-served—right——"

A gasping struggle for breath cut short Stoney's last words. Whether he meant that he'd gotten his own just deserts or that he died with resentment on his lips was never to be known.

Lee felt that it was best to get Kala away from the awful scene as soon as possible. He brushed his fingers over Stoney's clothing until he found a bulge in the pocket of his shirt. He drew out the packet of papers and gave them to Kala. Guiding her a few paces distant, he lit a match and together they examined the packet.

"Here's the bill of sale!" A cry of relief from the girl. "Oh, Lee, how can I ever thank you for all that you've done for father and me? And I firmly believed that you were one of Stoney's hired assassins."

"Can't blame you for that—at first," said Lee. "What did Stoney mean by Sandy's will?" He drew even closer to the girl.

"I know what he meant, for Sandy had always told me that he intended leaving me his property, poor old dear. I've seen this paper before," she tapped a legal-looking document folded in with the scrap of paper her father had been tortured into signing. "This is Sandy's will—but I wish that he were alive," she went on. "Jib Stoney meant to get away with it?"

Lee quickened his pace to keep up with the girl.

"Miss Kala!" A voice issued from the shadows of Sandy Crapes' cabin.

Lee's six-guns leaped from their holsters, and he jumped in front of the girl.

"Don't shoot, Lee!" Kala said, clinging to his arms. "It's Red Arrow, the Indian boy who works for us." She hurried forward, Lee striding beside her.

"Our boys, where are they? Are they hurt, Red Arrow?" she asked the Indian anxiously.

"One gone happy hunting ground, yes," came the guttural reply from the young redskin. "Two ride home, heap sick by bullets, mebby so not die, Red Arrow not know for sure. They send me back fight for Miss Kala."

"One dead, two heap sick by bullets," cried Kala Dale, her voice throbbing with pity for her brave men. She turned to Lee. "You see, they were neither cowards nor quitters," she said.

"I was sure of that myself," said Lee.

"Come, I must give father this bill of sale; that'll brace him up for the ride home. I must hurry—those poor wounded men need my care." Kala paused on the threshold of the cabin, speaking softly to Lee. "And you'll come with me, Lee?" she asked.

A happy grin lit up Lee's features. "Why, Kala," he declared promptly, "that's where I've been headed for right along."

Thunder Island

By Arthur Preston Hankins

(A Sequel to "The Wife of The Grizzly Bear")

CHAPTER XXVI.

AN OLD VOICE.

IN the snow-banked hut, Claire Faywood and Nicholas Starling stared at each other in wonder as they realized that a rifle had been discharged at the head of Thunder Island.

What could be the meaning of this? Who besides themselves was on the island? Could they have been deceived? Had the sound been merely the cracking of a limb or some small tree broken by the wind?

Nick roused himself.

"I must find out about this," he said shortly.

"I'm going, too," Claire quickly told him.

"Grab the .25-35, then," he commanded. "I'm desperately afraid, Claire, that Tye has tricked us. Maybe he's been fooling us all along, since he moved his camp back in the woods over there."

"What, Nick? I don't understand."

"Maybe the majority of his gang have been on the north bank for many days. I saw one of 'em over there, you know. I'm afraid three or maybe four of 'em have been there for a long time, cutting down that tree to make a bridge to the island so that they could get at us. They waited for this storm to come, perhaps, before finishing the job. Thought we'd not be able to hear the tree falling if the wind was high. Thought they'd sneak up on us in the night, and——"

"But, Nick—why the shot, then?" the pale-faced girl interrupted.

"That's puzzling," he admitted. "But let's not stand here idly speculating. Let's get out and know the worst—and fight 'em off, if it comes to that. Come on! Run! They can't have crossed as yet. Maybe we can keep 'em off the island."

Once more he grabbed her hand, and they stumbled out into the wind-whipped night. With his unerring sense of direction, the young man hastened the girl along toward the island's head. A limb, beaten by the storm, crashed in their path—a limb a foot in thickness. Nick half lifted the girl over it and on they plunged.

They came out of the sequoias and entered the grove of oaks and madrones that formed the timber at the head of the island. Here the wind came at them full tilt, as it swept across the river, and it was with difficulty that they kept their feet.

Nick drew the girl close to him and behind the trunk of a rambling madrone. They fought for breath a little, and then he urged her onward toward the spit of sand that formed the island's eastern extremity, and upon which the top of the big tree must now be lying.

Sure enough, as they staggered out upon the open spot, a flash of lightning revealed the expansive top of the fallen tree, a small forest in itself, with its innumerable limbs perpendicular and luxuriant with heavy foliage.

"Look! There it is!" cried the girl.

Nick also had seen, as the lightning crackled in the eastern sky, a dark figure emerging hastily from the foliage of the treetop. Nick threw his rifle to his shoulder and waited in an agony of intensity.

"Oh, Nick!" Claire laid a tense hand on his arm.

"No time for sentiment now!" he bellowed. "This has come to be a fight to the death, and the side that hits first wins much!"

She lowered her hand and stood rigid, trying to pierce the gloom with her eyes, shaking from cold and strain. Once more lightning darted across the cloudy sky. A shot rang out, and a spurt of fire leaped horizontally from Nick's rifle toward the fallen tree.

Nick had seen two moving figures this time, farther from the foliage than the first had been, clearly outlined against the crystal snow.

His quick shot had been ineffectual, he knew. It had been almost ridiculous to shoot under the circumstances—a waste of ammunition.

But he had at least given them to understand that he knew the attack had begun, and that he was ready to defend the island.

Then a strange thing happened. Faintly on the wings of the tempestuous wind came several rifle cracks. Nick stared in utter bewilderment through the gloom as one shot followed another. And he realized that the rifle was aimed toward the clouds and being fired into the air, because he plainly saw the upward-leaping spurts of flame.

"A signal!" he cried. "They don't want to fight, Claire! They're asking for an armistice!"

"No, Nick!" the girl shouted back excitedly. "It's Sheriff Kirby come to rescue us! I know it is! I know it—I know it!"

"Can't take any chances on making up to them. It may be Kirby, and it may not. All we can do is to wait for the next move from them, and be ready to meet it if it's a hostile move. I'll answer the signal, anyway."

Whereupon he fired five shots straight aloft, and hastily lowered his .30-30 to refill the magazine. The signal was immediately returned. A single spurt of flame darted aloft, and it showed at a point closer to the pair than the others had appeared.

Nick fired again and reloaded instantly. Then they waited, tense, expectant, rifles ready for any emergency, kneeling in the snow to make smaller targets of their bodies if trouble started.

It seemed hours before another shot was fired by whoever was working slowly toward them. Nick returned the

signal at once, and slipped another cartridge into the magazine.

Another flash of lightning crackled across the sky. Close at hand, Nick saw three black figures outlined against the white sheet of the snow. He snapped his rifle to his shoulder and bellowed: "Halt! Don't come a step farther until we've reached an understanding!"

He waited for an instant. He was doubtful if the men had heard, for he had hurled his challenge directly into the teeth of the tempest.

But now there came floating to his ears a hoarse shout, carried by the wind instead of being forced against it: "Claire! Claire! Nick Starling! It's I—Manasseh Faywood! Your father, Claire!"

Claire heard and understood. She threw up her hands, and pitched forward in the snow. But instantly she sprang erect, even before Nick could aid her. She leaped forward against the wind in the direction of the approaching trio.

"Claire! Claire!" Nick's warning rang out after her.

But Claire Faywood knew the voice that had called to her—the voice that had been dear to her since her earliest remembrance. She could not be deceived. Sobbing, she dashed forward through the storm, straight into her father's arms.

When Nick had panted up to the girl and the trio who had crossed on the monstrous bridge, Doctor Faywood's voice stilled all questions and congratulations.

"No time for sentimentality now, Nick," he cried. "They're after us—Tye and his men. We've fooled them somewhat and apparently given them a setback, but they're probably crossing on the tree right now. They mustn't land on the island. We'll have all the best of it. Let's make our stand immediately."

"Whatever you say goes, doc!" the young man answered, clapping him on the shoulder. "What do we do?"

"Back to the tip of the tree and hold 'em off!" And Doctor Faywood, releasing himself from Claire's wild clutch, darted through the snow.

"How many guns you got?" he cast back over his shoulder.

"Two," Nick answered. "But we've more in camp."

The doctor stopped. "Claire, can you get two more guns? Can you find your way to camp through this storm?"

"Yes," Claire bravely answered.

"Try it, girl. We've only one gun among the three of us. You couldn't do anything more important to help us than to get those rifles."

"But, doc——" Nick began, realizing the difficulty of the trip.

"She'll make it," interrupted Faywood. "I know her—she's my daughter."

But Claire was already running swiftly back toward the black forest of wind-tossed trees.

The men hastened forward. They reached the tip of the great, fallen sequoia. Faywood stationed them here and there about it.

"Let 'em have it as fast as they show up," he commanded. "Our lives depend on striking first. Shoot to kill. There's no other way."

Then through the dense foliage of the bridge-tree a light was seen bobbing along over the black water toward Thunder Island.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A WHITE FLAG.

IT was the .30-30 of Nicholas Starling that rang out to open the battle between the holders of Thunder Island and Skip Tye's gang as the first invader appeared in the foliage of the top of the fallen tree.

There was not much of a target to

shoot at—merely a bobbing light and the indistinct blur of a man through the whirling snow and tossing branches. But the light stopped its forward motion instantly, and was whisked from view or covered with a hat.

After that the only sounds were the howling of the wind and the raging of the angry waters, as the four men waited for the enemy's next move.

Doctor Manasseh Faywood, Tungapulla and Nick Starling had rifles. Professor Adolph McAfee bravely held an enormous club in readiness for a hand-to-hand encounter, and waited impatiently for Claire Faywood to return from camp with the guns she had gone to get.

There were four armed men in the Tye gang, perhaps all expert shots. The defenders of the island were more or less in the open, while the barbarians were hidden by the thick foliage of the fallen tree. The inequality of the situation was in favor of the outlaws, except that they did not know how many men they had to deal with, nor their scarcity of arms.

It was their uncertainty as to how many men were opposing them that had prevented them from crossing the river sooner. The popping of the fibers of the great tree, as it slowly fell to its death, had doubtless astonished them. It had seemed as if a dozen rifles were being fired, and they had kept to cover until the escaping trio were entirely across the tree and on the island. They had no means of knowing that Sheriff Kirby and a posse had not entered the valley and joined the others. In short, undecided as to what they were up against, they hesitated in pressing forward.

And now that a rifle had been discharged at the first man to cross the tree, they came to a standstill, drew together, and held a consultation.

It must have struck them as too perilous to go forward under the circumstances. Perhaps they even decided that it was better to give up the pursuit for the night and retire to the base of the tree, where lay their slain companion, whose forever silenced tongue could not tell them that only two white men and an old Indian had escaped across the monster bridge.

At any rate, nothing more occurred until Claire panted up with the extra rifles and two belts of cartridges. The eager watchers had not even seen the light a second time.

Hours passed after this, while the storm subsided gradually. The five on Thunder Island paced about and flogged their breasts for warmth, but kept a careful watch upon the bridge.

"They've given it up for to-night," was the general decision. "They're waiting for morning and for the storm to pass. They'll attack to-morrow."

As the slow hours dragged by this became the belief in the minds of all. And finally Nick Starling suggested that they go to his camp for warmth and to move supplies closer to the bridge, so that they would not be obliged to leave their posts when the real trouble came. It was a long time before Doctor Faywood would give in to this, but in the end he did.

Then, with Nick leading the way through the calming storm, they entered the forest of giants and made for the snow-banked hutches.

When they had warmed themselves at a hastily kindled fire, and the three newcomers had eaten something, they began moving camp to the edge of the forest closest to the bridge-tree. Just within the trees they pitched their new camp, with enough materials to last them temporarily.

While some of them stayed on watch, the others could move the remainder of the raft's cargo to the new site. But the scarcity of food was appalling, and Faywood looked grave when he heard of the raid of the grizzly bear. For it

seemed to all that a deadlock had been reached until Sheriff Kirby came to break it.

And this it seemed impossible for the sheriff to do, with the snow banners streaming from the mountains above and the land between the peaks and the desert covered to a depth that they could only guess at.

Neither side, it would seem, would dare to cross and start the attack. But the provisions of the islanders were pitifully low, while the gang could shoot game and keep themselves alive for an unlimited period of time.

"They've still got the best of it," Nick Starling laughed. "But, on the other hand, we've still got the gold and a slight hope of relief."

He poked the fire and threw on more wood, then rose to his feet.

"I'm going out and keep watch for a time," he proposed. "You and your father swap stories, Claire. Tell him about the gold and all that's happened to us. Maybe I'll think up a new idea, out there in the cold night."

As he threw his rifle into the hollow of his arm and walked away he heard, from Doctor Faywood:

"Then you didn't find the arrow, Claire dear?"

"What arrow, daddy?" his daughter answered.

But, curious though he was, Nick did not return to camp. He was taking no chances on the man with the galloping eyes.

By turns, the men of the little island colony watched the top of the bridge-tree until daylight came. But none of them saw any movement whatever.

Morning came bright and clear and cold, with no evidences of the past storm in the cloudless heavens. Nick was on watch again as the sun began to shower its light upon the Valley of the Monquis. Then he suddenly saw something that astonished him.

It was a white rag floating at the top of a tall pole standing in the midst of of the topmost branches of the fallen tree.

Beyond question, it represented a flag of truce. Some time during the night Tye or one of his men had risked a trip across the big trunk and upreared the signal for a conference.

Nick returned hastily to the camp, awoke his companions, and made a report. A short consultation was held.

"Better trust them as far as we dare," was Doctor Faywood's decision. "Get an empty flour sack, if you have one, and return the signal, Nick."

"We haven't anything but empty flour sacks, since the bear called on us," Nick returned dryly.

A short time afterward he stepped into the open and set up in the snow a tall pole, at the peak of which the flour sack snapped in the brisk morning breeze.

Ten minutes later, as the five were peering around the trunks of trees, they heard three shots from the foliage of the prone tree. Faywood raised his six-shooter and answered.

Then a man, with hands held high above his head, stepped from the foliage and walked a way through the snow in their direction. He came to a dead stop, and stood waiting, his hands still held aloft.

"What shall we do?" asked Nick. "Do we dare trust him to the extent of going out there unarmed? It's Tye himself."

"We've called his hand," Faywood reminded the speaker. "We can't back out now with grace."

"But the rest of the gang may be hidden there in the foliage, ready to pot whoever walks into the open, doc."

"Remember, son, that they want to find out the location of the gold. That's what they're fighting for."

"That's right. I'll take a chance. Train the binoculars on him carefully first, though, to see that he isn't packing

side guns. Look over his body for bulges."

A little later Doctor Faywood said: "He seems to be unarmed, Nick. I'll go and find out what's on his chest."

"Oh, no!" quickly retorted Nicholas. "This is my party—you're only a guest."

And he leaned his rifle against a sequoia and stalked boldly into the open.

It was necessary, because of the constant thunder of the falls, for the two emissaries to draw close together before they could make themselves heard. So as Nick tramped through the snow to meet the man who was now approaching him, he studied his physique carefully. Kirby had told him that Tye was a reputable rough-and-tumble fighter. Nick considered himself no mean antagonist in fistic warfare, and he decided that he probably would be able to hold his own if Tye should attack him in a primitive manner.

As they drew together, once more Nick was amazed and rendered squirmy at sight of the reddish, galloping eyes of Scipio Tye. The man waddled along through the snow, short, heavy-set, muscular, bearlike. But the reddish eyes that romped perpetually from side to side occupied almost all of Nick's attention.

Tye stopped suddenly and spread his legs. Nick continued on until only a few feet separated them. Both still held their hands above their heads.

"Bright, crimpy mornin'," grinned Skip Tye.

"Yes, indeed," Nick genially replied. 'Shall we lower our hands?"

"Jest as yeh say, young fella."

"All right." Starling's hands dropped to his sides.

Tye followed suit. Nick watched for a threatening move, but none came. Tye stared, if galloping eyes may be said to stare, and Nick gazed half amusedly back at him.

"I s'pose," the cowman offered, "that yer bunch is drawin' a bead on my noble breast with Winchesters, in case my bunch should open up on you."

"I shouldn't be at all surprised if you were about right, Mr. Tye."

"They needn't be. I'm on the square."

"You've proved it so far. Well, Mr. Tye, what can I do for you?"

"Sev'r'l things I wanta talk to yeh about. First, one o' yeh killed my best friend last night—Claude Gary."

"Claude Gary, eh?" mused Nick. "Where have I heard that name before? Oh, I remember now! Wasn't it Claude Gary that found the body of the murdered man, Graves, on your ranch near Encantadora?"

"Eggzactly."

"I wonder," said Nick, with a shrewd look in his blue eyes, "if Mr. Gary didn't get about what was coming to him?"

The reddish eyes galloped back and forth, and grew more menacing.

"However that may be," said Tye finally, "somebody's goin' to settle with me for Gary's death."

"Yes? And what else did you wish to tell me, Mr. Tye?"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WOLVES OR DOGS.

SCIPIO TYE ran stubby, calloused fingers through the reddish hair at his right temple, and his roving eyes played over the face of Nicholas Starling. If eyes can sneer, there was a sneer in Tye's.

"What's the grand idee o' you folks tryin' to keep me from gettin' that gold o' the white Indians?" he asked. "Yeh can't git away with it, and yeh oughta know it. Keepin' a weak, young gal out here on this island, sufferin' the torments o' the elements, when yeh know yeh can't win in the end! That's my gold, boy! This here's the second trip I made after her, and I ain't aimin'

to come a third time. I'm the discoverer of her. You and yer bunch is jest horn-ins."

"But," said Nick maliciously, "the fact remains that we've got the gold."

"And can't git offen this here island with her!" added Tye.

"Neither can you get on the island to get it away from us."

"We can starve yeh out. Yeh can't last much longer. We can stay here all winter, if necessary, with plenty game in the valley. I made old Tungapulla tell me all about this here island. I know they ain't any varmints on her 'ceptin' gray squirrels. Don't subjek that poor girl to the viciousness of a winter in this valley jest outa jackass stubbornness. I found out before I made the trip that yeh're a man o' means. Yeh don't need that gold. I do."

"There are others to be considered besides myself," Nick returned to this.

"Well, well, well—we can't stand here all day arguin'. Tell yeh what I'll do: If they's enough of it, I'll split with yeh, and go 'way and let yeh go 'cross yer wonderful bridge in peace. How much is they, son?"

"That would be telling," Nick laughed.

"They's a lot, I know. Tungapulla told me. The ole fox—I didn't think it was in 'im to gi' me the slip! But I made 'im tell me all about the gold bein' in the top o' that tall, dead tree. And I didn't have to manhandle 'im to make 'im do it, either. I see now, though, that he knowed you folks was gonta beat me in. He played me for a sucker, all right, I'll admit.

"But I'll tell yeh somethin' that maybe yeh don't know: It was him that climbed that tree and hid the gold up there. It's a long yarn—I won't spill it now."

"I doubt if I'd believe it, anyway," Nick said frankly.

"Well, that's all right. But she's true. And the Indian told me they's a lot o' gold in that package. So le's be reasonable, and stop this here loco warfare we're carryin' on, and split her fifty-fifty. Then we'll go our ways in peace."

Starling slowly shook his head. "I came after the gold on Kirby's account," he explained, "and I'm going to take it to him."

Tye's reddish eyes galloped with devilish mirth. "I'm right glad yeh said that, son," he chuckled. "I was thinkin' all along that maybe Kirby was with yeh now. Thought maybe he'd rambled into the valley on snowshoes when yeh didn't show up in Fandango on schedule. This here's good news. Now I know jest how many I gotta deal with, 'cause I know how many was in yer party when yer started out."

"You do?" Nick tried to make his tones sarcastic, though inwardly he was cursing himself for the stupid blunder he had made. "Maybe you can tell me then!" he added, with boyish blustering.

"Eggzactly eight, and one of 'em a gal," was Skip Tye's surprising answer. "And my bunch is in a position to keep the eight o' yeh on this here island till the snow drifts over yer skeletons."

Starling's spirits soared to the skies. He had forgotten all about Dan Brule, Cyrus Cass and Baldy Latour, the three desert rats who had left Fandango as members of the expedition. He had forgotten, too, that Tye had no means of knowing that the three were not with Doctor Faywood and the others and had helped to fell the giant tree.

"The eight of us will give you a mighty good run for your money, old-timer!" he threw back, for he had to say something or else yell for joy.

"Don't be silly! Come on, now—go back to yer bunch and think her over. I know what that there grizzly we chased onto the island musta done to yer pack. I seen yer raft tied up on the north side o' that island already.

How yeh got here on it is a plumb mystery to me, and yeh don't have to tell me if yeh don't want to—which I reckon yeh don't. But I do know jest about how much grub yeh could have had on that raft, and leave room for the eight o' yeh. So I know jest where yeh stand.

"So go back and talk sense to yer pards, and hoist the white flag when yeh wanta see me again. And lissen"—ominously—"do it before to-night! S'long!"

He wheeled in his tracks and walked back toward the treetop. Nick returned the courtesy and started toward the woods.

But as he stepped within the trees, all smiles over what he had to tell his friends regarding Tye's misconception of their numbers, Doctor Faywood grasped his shoulders.

"My heavens, Nick! I would have shot him, but—but it wouldn't have been fair! This is the limit!"

"What now, doc?" grinned Nick. "Everything is fine and dandy. He thinks Baldy Latour, Cyrus Cass and Dan Brule are in our midst—in short, that we're eight instead of——"

"He won't think so long," raged the paleontologist. "You couldn't see, because you were walking with your back to him. But after you two separated, and just before he stepped into the foliage of the tree, he plucked that confounded arrow out of the snow. And I know that in the note wrapped about it I wrote something to Clare which will convince him that only Tungapulla, Adolph, and I were on the other side trying to bridge the channel to the island. What a blow!"

Nick's lower jaw dropped. "The arrow! What old arrow?" he gasped. "I heard you mention an arrow to Claire last night, but——"

"Tell him, Claire—tell him!" cried the doctor. "I haven't the heart!"

Nick Starling was a miserable-looking boy when Claire Faywood had finished telling him the story of the fatal arrow.

"Well," he said, when he could think rationally again, "that's that. Now what do we do? We're evenly matched, counting Claire out—for of course she mustn't try to fight 'em. Four to four. It's an even break, to say the least. And in addition we'll have a gun loader, or water carrier, or nurse, or what not to aid the firing line, if it comes to that. But the grub, darn it! That's where they've got us. We can't hold out a week, doc, without much suffering."

"I doubt if Tye will want to wait a week to bring things to a climax," mused Doctor Faywood, "after he finds out that he hasn't eight enemies to deal with. Didn't he tell you to let him know before to-night if we are willing to split the gold?"

"Yes."

"Then that means he is contemplating a night attack. He'll be all the more keen to attempt this after learning our strength—or weakness."

They puzzled over the situation for the greater part of the day, while maintaining a strict watch on their end of the bridge-tree. But about three o'clock in the afternoon Nick burst out suddenly:

"I know what I'm going to do." His jaw muscles shuttled determinedly. "I'm going to climb to the top of Telescope Tree and begin sniping. Chances are I will be able to see 'em over there from the extreme top. If I can pick one or two of 'em off before they get onto me, we've got 'em."

The self-possessed Professor McAfee surprised every one by briskly speaking up.

"I am of the opinion, Nicholas," he stated, "that your decision is an admirable one. Though ordinarily a peace-loving man, it strikes me that the time is ripe to begin dealing summarily with these villains. My advice is for you to climb to the top of that tree, since you

are the most accurate marksman among us, and—and knock the tar out of 'em!"

"Three cheers, prof!" Nick applauded, clapping the dignified scholar on his broad shoulder. "Since *you* approve, my plan must be justifiable."

He chose the .30-30. Leaving Tungapulla on watch over the bridge, Claire, her father, McAfee and Nick went back into the forest and to the foot of the towering relic. Nick at once began the ticklish climb.

When he had reached the "moose antlers" at the top, he lay flat on his back looking up at the clear, blue sky while he rested from his efforts.

His thoughts were strange as he lay there. All of the adventures that the expedition had been through seemed unreal to him now. It seemed that he must be dreaming that he was lying in this spreading palm of the top of a dead tree three hundred feet above the earth, looking up at the blue sky, and about to rouse himself and attempt to shoot down other human beings in a forest across a mysterious river, which ran through a tunnel in the mountains into a weird, walled valley blanketed with snow.

So remote was he up there, with the rolling drums of the waterfall throbbing in his ears, that it seemed he must be the only creature in existence, that the surrounding wood composed the limits of his habitat, that there was no earth beneath him, no valley, no forest of giants, no river. Just the cloudless blue sky, the blackened shell that hemmed him in, and a being known to himself as Nicholas Starling. What was it all about, anyway? What was life all about?

Then his weird dreams passed. He thought of the girl, Claire Faywood—his girl. And then he knew what life was all about. It was about Claire and Nick. Life was wonderful, and it must be preserved and nurtured. Life was Claire. Life was love!

He sat erect, unslung rifle and binoculars, and stepped to the northern side of the shell. He would do this thing, if opportunity offered. Do it for love—for Claire!

He leaned in a jagged opening and set his binoculars to his eyes, training them downward on the rushing river and the timbered northern bank. They settled on the huge butt of the felled monarch. Expectantly he watched and waited, his rifle leaning at his side.

But there seemed to be no movement near the butt of the tree. Slowly the glasses traveled hither and thither over what little could be seen of the snow-covered ground at the feet of the silent, contemptuous sequoias back of it. The snow offered a strong contrast to the reddish bark of the trees, and if a man had moved along among the trunks within his range of vision the glasses instantly would have picked him up. But he saw no moving man, though the strong lenses revealed countless footprints in the white mantle of snow.

It seemed strange that one of the gang was not guarding that end of the bridge-tree, to prevent the prisoners from stealing across in broad daylight. But if there was a sentry on watch over there, he was standing behind a tree, and——

Nick lowered his glasses suddenly. A man's head and shoulders had appeared around one of the big trunks, and then his body came into view. He walked forward a few steps toward another tree, slapping his arms about his torso for warmth. Then he turned and walked back, and reversed the process again and again.

Meantime Nick had lifted his rifle to his shoulder. He squinted through the telescope sight, and the muzzle of the weapon followed the marching sentry back and forth. Nick was waiting for the man to stop, so that his aim would be the surer.

Then, on one of his backward trips,

the man passed from sight behind the trunk that had hidden him first. With a low curse, Nick lowered the rifle and found that his hands were trembling. After all, this seemed a terrible thing to do. He sighed with relief. He was glad that the man had vanished.

For a solid half hour he watched once more through the glass, now anxious for the sentry to come in sight again. But everything was motionless across the river.

"Confound him! I want him to come from cover, and I want him to stay hidden! I want to kill him, and I don't! This is what you might call——"

His eyes were tired from long looking through the lenses. The snow was bright, even though the sun did not strike through the foliage of the trees across the river. It strained his vision.

He lifted his glance and swept it about the mysterious walled Valley of the Monquis. North, east, west stretched a spotless sheet of snow, splotched here and there by groves of trees. Clear as an emerald, the lost river wound its snaky way down the valley and disappeared.

Suddenly Nick's blue eyes bulged. They were staring at something that seemed to move slowly, far to the north, against one of the perpendicular walls that hemmed the valley in. Something dark, like a long black snake against the whiteness of the snow, seemed to be creeping down into the valley. But for the whiteness of the snow, his naked eyes probably would not have noticed it.

"Herd of deer wandering down the trail into the sink," he mused. "The trail must be over there."

He picked up his binoculars once more and trained them across the Valley of the Monquis. After a short search they picked up the moving objects that Nick's naked eye had seen.

"Wolves, by golly!" he cried. "Coming down the trail in single file. Yes, sir—wolves or coyotes—— Great guns!" the cry suddenly broke from his lips. "Wolves, followed by men! What in the—— I've got it! By golly, I've got it! Kirby's coming! Kirby—*with dog teams!*"

CHAPTER XXIX.

A SUDDEN REVERSE.

NICHOLAS STARLING was almost incoherent when he had climbed down inside the shell of Telescope Tree and joined the waiting trio.

"We heard no shot, Nick," said Faywood. "What's the matter with you? You look happy as a maniac!"

"Kirby!" Nick gulped. "Star Kirby and a posse! They're coming with dog teams hitched to sledges! Coming down the old trail into the Valley of the Monquis!"

Faywood shook Nick's shoulder. "You've lost your head!" he cried. "Dog teams! We're not in the frozen North!"

"Can't help that. Dog teams or pet wolves are putting on a parade into this valley. Kirby's got dog teams somehow. That boy could get elephants or camels if he put his mind to it! I tell you he's the most wonderful——"

"Yes! I've heard you spout that stuff before. But how can he find us? Can he reach the island before to-night?"

"Couldn't if it weren't for the dogs. Night drops so early down in here. But I'll bet those Malemutes can travel! Star would make it if he knew which way to go. But he knows nothing about this island, or he'd have mentioned it. His explorations were at the western end of the valley. He might search for a month and not find us, if—— By golly, I've got it again! I'm always getting it! I'm so bright! Tye used Telescope Tree as his guide when he was making it up the valley for the island. We'll use it to guide Star Kirby!"

"Don't be silly, Nick!" chided Claire. "Tye knew that Telescope Tree was Thunder Island, didn't he? But Telescope Tree means nothing to Sheriff Kirby!"

"It will when I've climbed to the top, with a lot of dry, pitchy wood, and set her afire!" yelled Nick.

"I suggest," put in Adolph McAfee, "that we begin accumulating pine knots without delay."

They worked feverishly at collecting the dry, hard pine knots. Claire ran to camp and returned with a hatchet and a gunnysack. They filled the sack with the pitchy fuel and tied it upon the back of the intrepid climber.

"Take your time now—take your time!" Faywood warned the impetuous young man as, his burden on his back, he grasped the treads for the long ascent. "Just like you to fall at this critical moment and——"

"Close your trap, doc!" Nick shouted over his shoulder, and up he went.

But the extra strain put upon him by reason of the fagot which he carried soon calmed him down. He was a weary man when he finally crawled into the moose antlers at the top and shook off his load to rest.

He soon was at work, however. With a pine knot he scraped away the dry, fluffy snow at the north side of the old shell. There was no doubt in his mind whatever that the dry wood of the tree would catch on fire, once the pine-knots were burning briskly.

He split several of the knots with the hatchet. Then he built his fire under a projecting portion of the shell and lighted one of the pitch-laden splinters.

It burned like matchwood. The kindling caught almost immediately. Soon a brisk fire was blazing, with the flames lapping at the dry wood of the tree.

Nick leaned through the crack again, trained his glasses. In a short time he caught sight of the moving men and dogs, still on their slow way down the precarious trail into the valley.

Smoke stung the membrane of his nostrils, and as he started to turn for his descent he caught sight of two men across the river. One of them was pointing, and both were staring upward at the top of Telescope Tree.

Nick cast a glance aloft. Straight toward the heavens streamed a column of blue-black smoke. He laughed aloud as he grasped the topmost tread and began descending to his friends.

The top of the tree already was afire. Telescope Tree had served their purpose well. But it, too, like the royal king that had given its life to bridge the channel, was doomed after all the ages that it had stood, alive and dead, and defied the hand of time.

"Tye has seen the smoke already" Nick puffed, as he joined the others at the base of the old shell. "He'll suspect that something new is in the wind. He'll know that's a signal to some one. Let's get back on the firing line immediately. The son of a gun may decide to start things going right away. They say he's a fearless scoundrel—reckless, audacious."

In single file the four trooped back through the snow to the medicine man, whom they found standing stoically behind a tree, his jet eyes fastened on the island end of the bridge, his rifle in the hollow of his arm.

"Nick," said Faywood, "it strikes me that we're foolish to wait here for an attack."

"Why doc? We're under cover. They'll have to cross quite an open space, between the tree and us. We can pick 'em off as they come."

"Far better to keep them from gaining the island," returned the paleontologist. "The foliage of the bridge-tree is all on our side. It's heavy, as you know. But for a hundred feet from the other side there's not a limb.

If we get out on the tree and hide in the greenery, we can pick 'em off as they try to cross that bare space. Then they'll fall in the river, and we'll be done with them for good."

"Ferocious, doc, but logical," Nick praised the plan. "I couldn't have thought up a better idea myself. Let's set it to clicking immediately."

Confident that Tye would make some sort of move soon, they again changed their base. They hastily carried their belongings to the top branches of the bridge-tree, where they made a temporary camp. Here Claire was to preside, while the men went out on the tree over the river and secreted themselves among the gigantic limbs and heavy foliage.

Nick was the last to leave the girl. They stood for a little looking into each other's eyes, until finally Claire's were hidden by her long, black lashes, and the color swept her face.

"Claire," Nick said soberly, "I think our ordeal will be over in a short space of time. That there's going to be a fight out there over the river, I'm confident. Tye is a determined man, and now he'll be desperate. Have you anything to say to me before I go out there to hold him off, if possible, till Kirby comes?"

"What do you want me to say, Nick?" she asked.

"I want you to tell me that you realize I have been serious all along when I told you that I love you."

"I—I do believe that, Nick—now."

"And there's one thing more," he added, his voice husky with eagerness.

"Yes, Nick?"

"I want you to say that you love me."

There was a moment's hesitation, then she stepped slowly toward him, and laid her face against his breast. Nick threw trembling arms about her.

"Say it, Claire dear!" he begged.

"I've loved you for years, Nick," she confessed. "I realized it all along, but I—I just wouldn't give in. But I'm yours—if you want me, Nick dear. And, oh, Nick—we must win! We must win now!"

"We will!" he cried jubilantly, clasping her close.

Then he raised her face and kissed her tenderly. He released her, but held one hand. He drew away until the combined length of their arms separated them. Then, with a low cry, he drew her into a last close, enraptured embrace. He wheeled about, and, with one glance into her tear-wet eyes, bounded out through the limbs of the fallen tree.

Then came a shot from the middle of the river, and he hurried forward as fast as he could, twisting his way about the huge branches, pressing through the tiny, cold, green leaves.

He found Professor McAfee, Faywood, and Tungapulla hiding behind what had been the lowermost limbs of the tree when it had been standing. They were almost over the middle of the river, and beneath them the swift water boiled through the branches and leaves that were thrust down into it. Before them stretched a hundred feet of naked tree trunk, wider than an ordinary road of travel.

Here the sounds that pervaded the island and its vicinity were augmented by the churning of the water. Faywood was obliged to cup his hands about Nick's ear to make himself heard.

"Made a fool of myself, I guess," he shouted. "They appeared on the butt of the tree—all four of 'em. I got excited and let fly. Ought to have let them get halfway across that open stretch before opening fire. I scared 'em off, and didn't make a hit either, I guess. Adolph, practical old reprobate that he is, tried to stop me. But I've never fully grown up, Nick."

"Don't worry," Nick consoled him. "Maybe it's just as well. But it's a

darned good thing we got here first, doc. If they'd beaten us to this point, the situation would have been reversed. Maybe they will see the inadvisability of trying to cross on that open stretch. We can pick 'em off like swatting crippled flies! We don't want to fight if we can get out of it. With Kirby coming, they're absolutely hemmed in."

"If Kirby makes it before dark, we're the winners—sure," admitted the scientist. "But look at the clouds, Nick. Another storm is brewing. It'll be dark as pitch to-night. They'll wait for that."

"Any way they figure it, we've got 'em buffaloed," the young man insisted. "And——"

From across the river came the crack of a rifle, but none of the defenders of the island saw the spurt of flame.

"Oh-ho! Trying to scare us, eh?" Nick laughed. "But we can't hear the whiz of a bullet out here, nor its spat against wood. Got to keep out of sight, and——"

There came a fusillade of shots from the other side.

"Raking the foliage in the hope that a chance shot will find a target," said the doctor. "Keep behind the big limbs, boys. They'll soon tire of that, I think."

But they didn't. It seemed that the gang was not afraid of wasting ammunition. Shot after shot was fired, and, though they could not hear the whine of the bullets, the besieged were well aware that they were darting every way through the foliage all about them.

Nick knew, however, when a chunk of bark biffed him in the nose. It struck that "weak-sister" member of his anatomy with such force that the claret flew.

"Gosh!" he breathed, as he wiped the blood away. "If that had been lead—oh, boy!"

Doctor Faywood, from behind his limb, saw the crimson stream. Regardless of his own peril, he darted across to Nick, thinking that the boy was mortally wounded. A fusillade of rifle shots was the immediate result.

Halfway between his limb and Nick's, Faywood dropped to one knee, swayed, and went down in a heap. This Nick did not see, as his handkerchief was covering face and eyes. But Professor McAfee saw. This adamant old warhorse leaped out immediately to his friend's assistance. He ran through a hail of bullets. Then he dropped beside the girl's father, both arms flung wide.

It was at this instant that Nick became aware of the grave situation. He and Tungapulla arrived beside them simultaneously. Against a rain of lead they dragged the two to safety. Neither had ever before been nearer to death than at that moment, but neither the medicine man nor Nick was scratched.

Doctor Faywood had received his shot in the shoulder. He lay panting, with a red splotch gradually growing on his canvas coat. Professor McAfee had fared even worse. He was unconscious, and the bullet that had hit him had penetrated just above his heart.

Nick's face was white. Never since they had begun the defense of the island had the situation seemed so hopeless. Just when everything looked brightest for ultimate success, his two friends had been stricken down, both out of the fight, if not actually gasping out their lives.

CHAPTER XXX.

OVER THE RIVER.

THE old Indian understood the situation perfectly. There was no need for Nick to waste time in shouting orders at him above the clamor of the waters. He made motions for him to guard the approach, and, stooping, got an arm of Faywood over his shoulder and staggered with him back to Claire, winding his slow way through the impeding limbs.

The girl ran forward, stifling a scream, when she saw them coming. With a hand across her mouth, she stared in bewilderment at her father as Nick eased his burden to the ground.

"Brace up, now!" he encouraged her. "His wound is not bad, but he's out of the fight. You must be brave—braver than you've ever been before. Get the first-aid outfit and do what you can for him. Give him a couple of big jolts of whisky. Take a couple yourself. Your father will live—but Professor McAfee——"

He did not finish his sentence, and as Claire, with a fist pressed to her beating heart, began following his instructions, he bolted back through the foliage for the professor.

As he reached the side of the watchful Tungapulla and bent over the still form of Adolph McAfee, one glance was enough to tell him there was no use to take the risk of carrying him back to camp. Adolph McAfee was beyond all aid that the shaking hands of Claire Faywood could administer.

Nick, with an ache in his throat and boyish tears welling in his eyes, passed a tender hand over the professor's forehead.

"Good old scout!" he murmured softly. "I'll try to make 'em pay, prof—I'll try to make 'em pay!"

With a leaden heart, he stepped forward to his limb again, glanced once at the imperturbable Indian, whose nostrils were twitching with the thrill of conflict, and prepared for the battle of his life.

Just he and the aged, limping medicine man to hold the island against four ruffians, deadly shots, determined, desperate, and lustful for the gold of the dead Indians. And darkness was fast approaching. Already it was becoming difficult to see across the channel. The heavy clouds blotted out what little sunlight might have descended into the walled sink. The huge trees added their gloomy shadows. The Flute River was darkening fast.

Like starving wolves the barbarians across the river were waiting for deeper darkness. They probably had seen that two of their opponents were down. They knew, then, that they were now four to three, and one of the three a girl. Gun fighters that they were, they doubtless considered themselves the equal of one city man, an aged Indian, and a helpless female. Soon they would be creeping across the great bridge under cover of total darkness. Four to two! Were Kirby's Malemutes racing over the snow-swept spaces to his aid? Would they reach the goal in time?

This thought caused Nick to cast a swift glance at the top of Telescope Tree. He had forgotten his burning beacon in the intense excitement of the past few minutes. Might not the blazing tree throw its light over the river and make Tye's gang easy targets for his and Tungapulla's guns as they ran forward?

His hopes died a swift death as he looked. While the top of the old tree was still burning and casting a smoky blaze toward the dark heavens, the light that was thrown did not reach the river. Intervening trees, with expansive green tops, curtained the blaze from the immediately surrounding country. And, at that, the fire was a slow one, and did not light up the sky as Nick had expected it to. It struck him that the tree was burning inside, that the fire had not yet penetrated the outer shell. And the lower the fire crept toward the earth, the more would the greenery about it shade its glow.

But it still was acting as an unmistakable signal to the men who were racing to their rescue. From a great distance they would be able to see the glow, even though it did not light the tragic scene on the bridge-tree. There still was hope.

Nick's glance bored the growing

gloom. It seemed to him that the light was twice as dark as when he had glanced up toward the smoldering top of Telescope Tree. When would they come? When would they come? Not yet! It was not dark enough yet! They would wait a little longer. Just a little longer was all that would be necessary, for the shadows were drawing in, drawing in! In ten minutes, perhaps, black night would have settled over the river. Then they would come.

Yes, then they'd come! They wouldn't wait long after the gloom had become impenetrable. Oh, for some way to light the hundred feet of tree trunk between him and them! That was all that he and Tungapulla needed —just a little light. Even one of their electric torches would have thrown a path of brilliance along that tree that would have stopped the Tye gang as soon as it struck their eyes. But the electric torches all had been lost overboard in the underground channel of the river.

A sharp report directly at his side caused Nick to jump like an excited schoolgirl. While he had been dreading total darkness, it had pounced down unannounced. He saw the snake of orange fire that leaped from the muzzle of the old Indian's rifle. Could Tungapulla see in the dark, like a cat?

Again the rifle of the old warrior spat a vicious tongue of fire across the river. Nick raised his own weapon and fired blindly, aiming at the height of a man's breast along the tree trunk.

Then silence again, save for the maniacal laughter of the waters of the Flute. They were coming! Nick felt it in his very bones. He could picture the four villains creeping slowly along the tree trunk, hidden by the hellish blackness. They were coming. Some subtle sense that the Indian possessed had warned him, where the civilization-dulled brain of the white man had given him no sign. It was dangerous now to shoot. They would see the spurts of flame and be guided by them. Nick cupped his hands about his mouth and shouted at the top of his voice in Spanish:

"Don't shoot, Tungapulla! No use! Too dangerous!"

"Si, señor!" came back the ready answer.

Nick Starling lived a lifetime in the next few minutes. Soon four men would be upon him and the decrepit Indian, and there would be a brief struggle over the foaming water. Then, though the two of them might take some toll of the gang, it would be only a short time until both of them were shot or beaten from the tree trunk into the remorseless waters.

They were coming! They were drawing closer, closer, closer! Oh, for one gleam of light!

And then light came. Slowly, with strange deliberation, a pale radiance was cast over the weird scene. Nick realized it when one of the branches ahead of him crept into view in a ghostly way. Then he saw gently waving foliage. It turned silvery under this unearthly light that was growing steadily.

And now it quickened. Other limbs took shape. Weird, uncanny shadows played hither and thither. Nick began to see the enormous tree trunk stretching out before him across the water.

And then he saw a creeping man. Not stopping to fathom the strange phenomena, he threw his rifle to his shoulder and fired. He fired again. The kneeling figure sprawled flat, tossed about a moment or two, and then lay immovable on the tree trunk.

Swiftly the light grew brighter. Tungapulla's rifle cracked. Out over the river a scream rose above the tumult of the frenzied water.

Nick saw another figure. He fired again. The light grew brighter and brighter. The man that he had fired

WE

at turned and started running back toward the other side. Nick aimed deliberately at the middle of his back and pumped the lever of his rifle as he sent bullet after bullet on its way. The man threw up both hands after one shot, leaped sidewise, pitched off the tree trunk into the black water underneath.

The light was bright now. Both Tungapulla and Nick were firing steadily at two other figures, retreating swiftly. Nick had emptied his .30-30. He dropped it and grasped up the doctor's gun. He threw it to his shoulder, resolved to make the most of this opportunity. His first shot dropped the foremost runner.

Then came shots from the other side. Nick saw their angry spurts. His target had flown out of the radius of the light that had saved the defenders of Thunder Island. Nick and Tungapulla waited, rifles ready, gazing along the lighted tree trunk, both mystified, but realizing that some strange thing had occurred to save them from certain death.

Then a great blaze of fire swept into view before their very eyes. It stopped at the tree trunk. And then Nick knew.

Out there, halfway between him and the other shore, a death raft of the Flauta Indians, with its gruesome cargo, had drifted against the bridge-tree and had been stopped by it. And there it hung, tossed by the angry waters, while the flames lapped at the dead body of the Flauta Indian lying prone on the greenwood frame that supported it.

Tungapulla's guttural voice sounded directly in Nick Starling's ear.

"Dead Indian," he said. "Go happy hunting ground! You savvy? Plenty good for you—plenty good for me. Le's beat it!"

But before they could "beat it" to whatever place he had in mind, a voice swept out over the river, and a man, hands held high, stepped abreast the burning burial raft.

"Hey!" it thrilled above the rumble of the waters. "Nick Starling! Don't shoot!"

Nick stepped out in the open. "I won't!" he bellowed. "Come into the fold, Star, and tell me you got the last of the Tye gang!"

"I did!" Star shouted. "And it's Tye himself! I'm coming!"

And in less than a minute the Twin Stars were hanging in each other's arms, for there are times when the most mannish men must act like women.

They were all in the newly made camp of the sheriff of Chaparral County. Twelve men had accompanied the sheriff on his rescue trip into the Valley of the Monquis, and it had taken but a short time to transport the belongings of the defenders of Thunder Island across the gigantic bridge. Doctor Faywood, though suffering, was smiling happily, wrapped up in blankets before a leaping fire at the butt of the fallen tree. His daughter sat beside him, watching over him tenderly, her face flushed with triumph and relief from the tremendous strain. Skip Tye, the man with the galloping eyes, was adorned with the handcuffs and leg irons that Starford Kirby had brought along. Every other member of the Tye gang was dead.

About the camp lay the dogs from the North, dozens of them, their bright eyes blinking in the firelight, their tails wagging whenever any of the humans looked their way. They seemed to believe that this happy state of affairs was all their doing, and they expected praise and any stray chunks of venison that happened to be not working at the time.

"I heard before we started that there'd been an epidemic of some sort among the Flauta Indians and several of them died," said Sheriff Kirby. "They don't place the bodies on the burial rafts right away, you know. A

week's ceremony precedes the firing and floating of the rafts. I guess all of the others got snarled up in the underground passage of the Flute. But this one got through, and, oh, boy, what it did for you! I think there must be more than one passage up in there, Nick, or this body wouldn't have come through burning. It certainly didn't come the way you did."

"No," Nick agreed, "the splashing along our route would put out the Chicago fire."

"I was away when Baldy Latour, Dan Brule, and Cyrus Cass came back and reported what had happened in the underground passage of the Flute. I was at the extreme other end of the county on a mysterious business, and they couldn't find me. I was kept there till snow began to fly in the mountains, and didn't hear of your catastrophe until after I returned.

"I wouldn't believe you were hopelessly lost, though the boys said you were goners. But I didn't know how to get over those snow-covered mountains, even with snowshoes.

"Then, unbelievable luck, I read in the paper about an old friend of mine who had just come down from Alaska with a string of Malemutes, to put the dogs in the moving pictures. He and I roamed Alaska together many years ago. And—well, he proved that he was still my friend. We'd never made it in but for the dogs. And if there's any gold lying around loose, Nicholas, some of it would come in handy in squaring my old pal with the motion-picture company with whom he'd signed a contract for the pups. He broke that contract for me, and——"

"Star," said Nick gravely, "we'll set every one of these dogs on a pillow of spun gold. There's enough buried at the base of Telescope Tree to finance a good-sized war."

"Them be kind words, brother," said Kirby fervently. "I hate the stuff, but it's all-fired handy. I'll take a bag of it out with me when I go, if you don't mind. The rest must remain till spring, if there's so much as you say."

"No, you take it all," said Nick. "The dogs can handle it on the sledges. For, since you've brought so much grub along, we've decided to dig in and stick the winter out. Doctor Faywood would suffer too much on a trip like that. He'll be fine and fit by spring, and then we can go on with our exploration of the valley. About all we know of it now is a thirty-acre spot, named Thunder Island by my future wife."

"Your future wife!" Kirby grinned at Claire. "So it worked?"

"Yes, she surrendered just before the fight began."

"The safest time to surrender," chuckled Starford Kirby. "Congratulations, both of you! I'll take the gold, then, if you're bent on staying. And half of it will be waiting for you wherever you say when you come out next summer."

"That half goes to Doc and his estimable daughter," Nick declared. "I've got too much of the stuff now. If I'd had less, Claire would have consented to marry me years ago. But, then, I'd have missed this grand adventure. Two hours ago it didn't look so grand, did it, Claire? But now—well, now it's over—and we're ready for another one!"

"But not on Thunder Island!" quickly added Claire.

The hour was late and the newcomers were excessively tired. One by one they crawled into their blankets. Doctor Faywood was sleeping easily.

But Claire and Nick sat alone under the brooding sky, holding hands, looking up silently at the smoldering top of Telescope Tree. They listened to the thundering of the waterfall while they dreamed of future days.

THE END.

By His Teeth

By Austin Hall

Author of "The Pony and the Bandit," etc.

NO one could blame Billy Bowen for being proud of his teeth because—well, they were just as good as a dentist could make them. After years of living on the soft part of the hard things that are to be picked out of the mountainous desert, old Billy had made that trip to the city, and in a wild moment had had his mouth gone over to the tune of several hundred dollars and the niftiest piece of dentistry that ever adorned a human being. And now, instead of the old, wizened face, Billy had returned with full features and a smile.

"Yep," he said proudly to his old partner, "just sets me off. I got to looking at a paper on the way down, and it said that a man is just as old as his teeth; and I'm dog-goned if I don't believe it. No more soup and mush fer me. Henceforth Billy Bowen is a-goin' to live like other men do. He's a-goin' to chew dry jerky right off the hunk. He's a-goin' to enjoy steaks and everything else that can be eaten. Yessir! They make me look like a kid. I feel like I could live to be a hundred. I kin run like a deer, and I got a stomach like a ox. So why shouldn't I?"

There was no denying the fact that old Billy Bowen was proclaiming a miracle accomplished. Twenty years had fallen off his shoulders so suddenly that Tommy Jarvis, his old partner, could scarcely credit his eyes. Old Billy had walked into the cabin unannounced, placed his pack against the wall, and displayed himself; his smile was seamed through his whiskers.

"Any news?" he asked when the other had turned him around a dozen times and pulled his beard to see whether it was true. "Any news?"

No one could criticize Tommy Jarvis for being excited; he was positively astonished. Old Tommy just sat on the stool and looked his wonderment.

"News!" he exclaimed. "News! Why, you gosh-durned old hairpin! You ask me fer news when I been right

here in the mountains all the while you been gone. News? Course they's news! You ole son of a gun! Ain't you gone and got a new face!"

The other grinned sheepishly and looked at the flood of sunlight bathing the wide forest. It was wonderful to get back to the whispering pine trees; the old brook was babbling below the flat, and upon a snag a saucy blue jay was screeching out a raucous challenge.

"Jest like a kid, ain't I?" Old Billy's eyes were twinkling. "An' yuh ain't got no news, eh? Well, I got lots of it. First place, I brung back a new face, as you see. Second place, they's claim jumpers working down through Saddle Bar. Third place, you an' me is goin' tuh get rich. I been a-puttin' this off, because I didn't know whether it was worth it or not; but now that I've gone and got fixed up and there's a chance of my living a hundred years, it's different. Mebbe I'll get married. Ain't no tellin' what a handsome feller will do, you know. Gosh, it feels great to see you. We're goin' tuh start in the mornin', Tommy, an' we're goin' tuh be rich. Ain't no mistake about it; and they won't be any claim jumpers, neither."

Partners through long years of prospecting, old Billy Bowen and Tommy Jarvis were almost as man and wife. Billy was tall and straight, while the other was short and stout; and, like the two in the fairy tale, one could do what the other couldn't. But of late years Billy had been afflicted by ill health—a calamity that had done away with further adventures in the mountain wilderness. But now the old fellow appeared to be as fresh as a ten year old. He thrust his heel into the cleft of a bootjack and gave a heave.

"Thar she is, by gum!"—holding up the boot. "Ain't it a relief, though! Would you believe it, Tommy, they ain't a hotel in the city that's got a bootjack? They got everythin' else, includin' lights that you make with a button; but when you pull your boot off you've just got to take your foot under your arm and hop around the room until you get it off. Ain't nothin' like being home fer convenience. But I was tellin' you about them claim jumpers down to Saddle Bar. Seems like they're a bunch of young rascals that are laying around fer something that they don't have to work for. Old Oscar Carlson told me as how they was a syndicate, or something like that, with some connections in the city. Their game isn't to prospect, but just follow behind us old-timers and look at what we've got. They're working the land office fer fair. Johnny Watts, the register, has whispered out that they're a bunch of crooks; but he says that it ain't his fault. He says, if they come in and grab off a mine that ain't got the assessment work done, they're just exactly inside their rights. And I guess they are. Only they better not try any of their cleverness on a claim of ours. And I'm a-telling you, Tommy, old boy, we're goin' to start right out to look fer that very thing."

Old Tommy Jarvis had been anticipating a prospecting trip for many moons, but hitherto he had been held back by the ill health of his partner. There was no use talking—the vacation in the city had worked wonders. It was like old times to hear Billy talking of riches and a gold claim just ahead. What did he care for claim jumpers? Nothing at all.

Early next morning the two old men loaded the packs on the mule and started out of the mountains toward the blazing desert and the golden lure that lay beyond. The sun rimmed the mountains in the east and cast its rays on their eager faces. They had been on hundreds of trips before, but never had they had one just like this. Old Billy, leading the way, proclaimed his exuberance.

"Just like old times, ain't it?" he said. "The long trail ahead, and just you and me on the desert. Ain't a soul in sight. An' it's hot, but it's lovely. Ain't nothin' like this in the city. It's freedom. And over thar there's gold —gold fer you an' me, Tommy! Just us. It's 'Shorty' Hinchburn's old mine that we're headed for. You remember he came in and got killed, and they never could find it. But I know where it is. Shorty told me that night. It's a bonanza, Tommy. And they's water up there to wash it. Across the desert and over there in the Cinnabars! I kin go to it as straight as a shootin' star."

Lizards scooted and rattlers spun their warning as the two old men tramped through the glaring waste hour by hour, toward the gray outline of the distant Cinnabars; but never once did they turn away from the direct line that Billy had laid out. On the second day they arrived at the barren foothills, rocky and forlorn, fringing the forbidding plains. Here old Billy skirted along until he had come to a deep cleft that gave promise of a gorge leading up among the peaks.

"As straight as a die," he announced. "Didn't I tell you? She's up there off a red gorge. I got my bearings coming across by that mass of gypsum shining on that thar peak. That's what Shorty told me. 'Then you hit fer the gulch in the foothills and keep a-goin' until she narrows into a gorge—red quartzite—and follow until you come to water. Keep a-goin' until you find a broken juniper bedded into the bank and sticking out. Then keep on until you arrive at the next creek running into the gorge. Up about two miles, and she's free gold.' That's what he said. It's the easiest direction that we ever followed. Ain't nothin' to it."

For hours they traveled up the gulch without discovering anything like quartzite, and then, all at once, coming around a twist in the cañon, they knew that they had arrived. The high slopes on either side seemed to stand up suddenly and close together; the heat gave way to a sudden coolness, and they knew that they were near water. The old mule perked up his ears.

"Here she is!" spoke Tommy Jarvis. "Here she is. Just as you said. They's water. And we ought to find that juniper easy enough. But—hello! What's this? Tracks!"

They had halted in a cleft where the dry creek bottom narrowed to a few rods of gravel, interspersed with seeping pools and sandy pockets—just the place where a man would stop to drink. There, not a day ahead of them, some one had apparently done that very thing. The print was plain—the foot and toe of a boot where a man had knelt beside the pool. Old Tommy Jarvis was too experienced not to read the whole story, and to understand, also, just who the man might be—a city man. The track was as plain as day.

"Claim jumpers," he announced, looking back at Billy Bowen. "Them fellows you met in town. Most likely they've heard about this place, as well as you. Shorty Hinchburn's mine was always the aim of every newcomer that's headed into the Cinnabars. If we find it first, they'll be trouble; and if we don't, they'll doubtless stake her out themselves."

But old Billy had gone ahead with the mule; claim jumpers meant nothing to him when he was on the last and the greatest trip of his life. His long strides and jaunty air proclaimed his confidence.

"They ain't a-goin' to beat us, Tommy. Don't worry. Cause they don't know nothin' about that juniper. If they do find it, they'll be guessing. You an' me, Tommy, is traveling straight. We'll be there in no time now. Shorty said—— Well, ain't you coming?"

The events of the next few hours

proved that the old man was correct as to every forecast. Not only did they locate the juniper log bedded into the bank, but also the creek that ran into the main gorge. Following up a mile or two, they halted at the base of a hill where another tributary forked into the first. Old Billy simply tied up the mule and got out his pan. The place had all the earmarks of the original claim. Not only that, but half an hour later old Tommy, who had gone ahead, returned with a shout.

"It's her, Billy!" he called. "It's her —just as you said. I've found one of Shorty's markers. He filed, but he didn't register, you remember. If he'd ever turned in these locations, she'd never 'a' been lost. All we got to do is stake her. Only, with them claim jumpers hanging around, we ain't got no time to fool. It's only a day or two over the mountain to Saddle Bar, if we go that way. You kin go and I'll stay. Hey, you durn ole cuss! Why don't you talk?"

But when he came around the abutment of rocks he saw the reason. Old Billy was squatting beside the tiny stream, weaving his pan from side to side and gazing at the result with eager eyes. Tommy, sneaking in with soft steps, heard him murmuring:

"It's Hinchburn's gold—just the very same. I always knew that some day we'd find it, if we ever got a chancet fer one more trip. It's gold, Tommy, fer you an' me! Providence held it here fer us to come and get it. I'm as perk as a peacock, but this here gold is the last thing we could ask fer. Ain't it glorious? In our old age! On our last trip! And we make a strike!"

The sun poured its heat into the narrow gorge, and an eagle, swinging overhead, poised to watch the two old men paying their devotions to the last strike. An hour passed, but they were too eager to notice anything but the streaks of yellow that adorned the edges of the pan. No sound was heard but their breathing and their whispered exclamations. No time to watch the gorge for the intrusion of unwelcome guests. Old Billy Bowen and Tommy Jarvis, bent double, could not see. Two men were coming up the gorge, each holding to the edge of the rocks and stepping lightly. Closer, closer! Still the old men did not see. Came the sound of old Billy's voice:

"Hinchburn's! Tommy, old boy, fer you and me!"

The men separated and came in on either side—a rush! The old miners fell into a heap. Next instant Billy was on his back, with a khaki-clad rascal kneeling on his chest. Words, shouts, and curses!

One of the attackers was a young giant; the other was of middle age. Old Billy, winded by the sudden attack, found himself peering at a blue-eyed villain; he heard him talking.

"We got you now!" the man was saying. "We were up on the mountains and we saw you coming across the desert floor. Knew who you were, and that if you were heading this way you must be looking for the Hinchburn. Thanks, old boys! Thanks! We wasn't a-going to tap you, but when we followed up the creek and saw what you was a-doing, we just knew that we had arrived. Thanks! You fellows are too old to enjoy it, so we're just a-going to hold you here and go in and file on the claim. That's our business, anyway. We're the champion filers of the whole known earth. We don't care who discovers a mine so long as we can file on it and do our duty by our Uncle Sam. We'll just tie you up, friends, and then, after we set some markers to comply with the law, we'll hie ourselves to the land office and complete the job."

It had all come so suddenly that Billy Bowen could hardly understand; besides, he had sand in his whiskers and

some in his eyes; he could distinguish Tommy's irate voice on the ground near by.

"Durn ye!" he was grunting. "Let me up! What yuh mean by sneaking in like this? You're a claim jumper, yuh are! If I had a-hold of my .45—— *Ughhhgh! Whooofst!*"

But evidently, from the sound of Tommy's protest, the villain had hold of the weapon; the exclamations died into the sibilance of a man spitting out a mouthful of sand. Old Billy, flat on his back and with the sun in his face, began to take notice of the man above him, and at once he realized that he did not have a chance. But back in his mind he was thinking: "Dang you! You're a young man and in the flower of youth. But I got experience and I ain't old yet, by a long shot. If I keep my eyes open I kin beat you somehow. We ain't lost the mine yet. But I sure have got to use my head. Yessir!"

"Let me up," he said at last to the young man on his chest. "I guess you've got us beaten. And it's the Hinchburn mine, too, my boy. I'll tell you that. I guess you've got us beat for sure."

But the young man laughed gleefully. Old Billy decided that he was not a bad sort, only he was a little too heavy. The fellow had blue eyes and sandy hair; something about his features betrayed his nature—a vaunting character, sure of his own prowess and a bit of a sport. When he had made sure of his man, Billy turned on his side to take a look at his partner. Sure enough, old Tommy Jarvis was done for; the villain on his chest was tying him up, winding the cords around and around until the old man was as helpless as a mummy. When that was done the fellow came over to help his companion do the same with Billy.

"You ain't giving us a chance, are you?" spoke the old man ruefully. "Don't you know we're old, and that we need that mine. Ain't you got a heart? Old Tommy, now——"

"Shut up!" came the answer. "The less you say, old man, the better off you'll be. We ain't got no time. We got to get into town right pronto."

"It's a long walk," spoke Billy Bowen, still thinking. "I suppose you fellers will head right out into the desert. It's——"

There was method in his chatter, even though the others did not perceive it. If he could get their direction and find out how they were traveling, it would help out immensely when he had solved the scheme on which he was working.

"It's none of your business," answered the middle-aged villain. "You're here, and here you stay. But I'll let you know that we've got a horse, and that Mr. Bogg, here, is a good rider. You're pretty lucky that you don't get hurt. When we're finished we'll let you go back where you come from. We ain't murderers—see?"

As soon as they had the old men tied, the rascals carried them over to the shade of the bluff and let them lie there. That done, they returned to the creek, surveyed the pans, and held a consultation. Billy did not say a word until the younger man had shouldered a pack and started down the creek. The other fellow went on washing the sand, smiling as he did so, and ever and anon casting a cutting remark at the old men. Old Tommy started to answer him in kind, but Billy whispered a warning:

"Don't say a word, Tommy, old boy! Don't say a word. They's two of us and they's one of him. We been in tighter places than this, an' we allus got out. That claim was held fer us by Providence, and we're goin' to have it. Just wait an' see."

All that day the man kept on working and laughing his exultation, but not once after those first few words did the old men answer. However, as soon as night came on old Billy set to work.

The man built a fire and cooked his supper, after which he sat down to smoke his pipe. Billy began working his way toward his partner, knowing well that in a few minutes the fellow would be asleep. It was hard work; he had to jerk and twist, but he managed to gain his way inch by inch. Finally the head by the fire began to droop; the man lay down. Now was the time! Billy Bowen had twisted himself right against his partner's face. He managed to whisper:

"Just dig in with your teeth, Tommy. You got good ones. See if you can't cut one of them cords. It's our chance."

Thereafter followed a whole hour during which Tommy Jarvis turned his face in every conceivable shape to get hold of his partner's bonds, and in the end Billy felt a loosening about his arms. One cord gone! Then a half hour while they worked it out. An other cord loose! And old Billy was able to get his arm free. The man by the fire was snoring, just as Billy had counted on. All he had to do now was to untie Tommy and finish the job. In another minute there was a different scuffle, with old Bill sitting on a chest and the claim jumper loudly yelling for help.

"Yep," said old Billy, "you can yell, but it won't do you a bit of use, 'cause they's two of us. Your pardner has gone in to file on the claim, but he ain't done it yet by a long shot. This mine belongs to Tommy and me. Understand? And now I'm a-going to turn you over to Tommy and let him hold the fort while I scoot in and head off the other feller."

The man stopped yelling. He looked up at the moon and then at his captor.

"Yes?" He laughed derisively. "Well, it won't do you no good. My man has got a six hours' start. He'll be at the land office before you get out of the mountains. Once we file you can holler all you want. The mine will be ours. We'll have the papers. See?"

"I see a lot," answered Billy Bowen softly. "But I ain't never lost a race yet. I ain't so old as I look. Just take hold of him, Tommy, old boy, and see that he doesn't bite hisself while I'm gone."

Ten minutes later Billy Bowen was on the old mule and headed out of the mountains—only he was not going in the direction taken by the other. Billy was headed up instead of down; he was going straight across by a route that would lop off miles of the journey. The moon was hanging on the western rim; the air was cool; and there was nothing to stop him. He spoke to himself as he rode along:

"Yep. Just like old times. You don't get nothin' 'less you fight fer it. That's jest the way we likes it. It's been a grand trip, and if I can only overtake that young man it will be the best we ever had. I will have to use my head. Just the same, something tells me that we can't lose."

Two hours before daylight he headed the old mule down the last hill and out into the desert. All was going well until, without a particle of warning, the animal stumbled and fell. There was a grunt and a groan as Billy Bowen went rolling out of the saddle. When he got up the mule was standing on three legs. The rest of the journey would have to be accomplished on foot. There was not a moment to lose. He examined the animal to see that there were no bones broken, and when he had satisfied himself that the brute had only sprained a leg he took down his canteen and started on a slow run. The accident had given the race a new aspect. Just the same, he was not discouraged.

"Ain't so bad," he muttered. "I got time yet. If that fellow came out the way I think, he'll be about six miles behind. That short cut was steep but

it saved hours. I allus could run like a deer."

He ambled along for another hour at a dog trot which he knew would not exhaust him, his feet hitting the sand with an easy tread and his whiskers surging back over his shoulders. Then, just before daylight, he got another surprise. This time he heard sounds, and the sounds made him falter and listen. Footsteps! Some one running! Running like himself. Could it be possible? Perhaps the other fellow now—— Could it be that he, too, had lost his mount? The footsteps were coming from the leeward—over his right shoulder. Old Billy chuckled and turned to meet the other coming in. He perceived a shape running easily in the darkness. Billy worked alongside.

"Good morning." He spoke gleefully. "Out for a little exercise? Training, I suppose?"

Then the shape came closer. It was the young man who had sat on his chest. But he was evidently a sport of Billy's own choosing. If he was nonplused he did not disclose it. He never slackened his pace.

"So you got away, eh? I was afraid of that. That pal of mine always was a good sleeper. Headed over the mountains on your mule, eh? I ought to have turned her loose. Or did you come afoot? Me? I lost my horse back there in a squirrel hole. Broken leg! What you trying to do, beat me on foot? Sorry, old fellow, but if that's your game you're done for. I've never lost a foot race in my life. Just the same, I admire your spirit. Fine weather, ain't it?"

The sun, peeping over the eastern range, cast its rays over the desert floor. Old Billy was running easily, but he did not know just how long he could stand it. Besides, the man next to him had every appearance of an athlete. He could tell that by his stride—easy, graceful, without effort. But there was no telling how he would act when the sun was up. Just the same, it would never do to let the other kid him. Somehow he would have to beat him out. The old man thought quickly; and out of the recesses of his fertile head he brought another scheme. The thought came to him with a jump. Hurray! Now he knew he could win! But it would not be by outrunning the young man.

"Yep," he answered, "it's fine weather. But it'll be warmer after a while. I lost my mule same as you lost your horse. Kind of nice to have company, ain't it? Terrible lonesome running out here all alone with all them horn toads. If you don't mind, I'll jest keep you company—let you pace me, if you don't go too fast—and then I can be there when you file them locations. Of course, you will get there first, because you are young and can beat me at sprinting and long distance and anything else. And you don't have to beat me much, because you know the rule of the land office in these cases. The first there, the first served. All you have to do is put your hand on the book. Ain't that right?"

The younger man laughed.

"I guess you're right. That's been my experience. I ain't worried about your beating me at all. If you want to run with me, just go to it. You're a game old card, any way you take it. So long as I stick ten feet ahead of you I'm perfectly satisfied."

"Thanks," said old Billy. "You can make it fifteen. And I'll give you my promise as an old-timer that I won't try to sprint you out of it at the end."

But had the young man heard the old fellow chuckling to himself he might have changed his tactics. For, be it known, old Billy knew he had the race as good as won.

Old Johnny Watts, the registrar at the land office, was out on the veranda

cooling himself when he chanced to see that strange race over the desert. The men were minute objects, but there was something about their movement that told of their speed. The spots seemed to go up and down and then filter out into mirage, but they kept coming on.

"Funny," he said. "I'll go and get the telescope. Ain't very often you see men running in a hot place like this. I wonder."

Then, when he had adjusted the glass, he began smiling.

"Can you beat that?" he said. "It's that young fellow I suspected of claim jumping. And the man behind him is old Billy Bowen. He's got a nerve running with a young man like that! I'll bet they're beating it in to file on a mine. Poor ole Billy! I wish I could help you. But you ain't got a chance in the world. Let's see. They're coming in from the Cinnabars. That will be range twenty-nine. I'll get out the book and sit here waiting. Billy's a wise old coot and he knows the rules of the land office. Mebbe he'll have something up his sleeve."

Nearer and nearer! Two and two, with Billy making no effort to gain the lead! They were almost to the door—coming up the veranda! The young man passed through. Billy had climbed the porch. Johnny Watts was waiting with the book on his desk. The first man to claim a legal preference would win. Then—he saw Billy make a pass across his mouth, and simultaneously something landed on the register book with a thud.

Old Billy's voice was ringing out as clear as a bell:

"I claim preference! First come, first served. The rules of the land office! Preference! Them plates is out of my mouth. They're my teeth. They're part of me. So I got here first. Yep. How about it, Johnny Watts? Don't I win?"

The other had reached the desk; he had heard Billy's voice, and he was not to be denied. But old Billy was standing beside him. Watts, the registrar, watched the beautiful piece of dentistry slip into the old man's hand. He began chuckling.

"I guess, Billy, you win. Them was your teeth, I suppose. It's up to me, and I guess I'll have to rule that they're a part of your body. If you please" —to the stranger—"I think Billy Bowen and I have a little business."

But a half an hour later Johnny Watts and Billy Bowen were having a quiet little talk in the back of the office.

"What I can't see," said Watts, "is why you didn't throw your hat. Anything of yours would have held the book, if you had got it in. I don't see it yet."

Whereat old Billy scratched his head.

"I know you don't. But that young fellow was onto all the rules of the office. He was waiting fer my hat. He would have knocked it as soon as I threw it. But he didn't expect me to sling in my teeth. The hardest thing I had to do was to keep him from running away from me. I fooled him into pacing me."

MEXICAN SHOOTS UP NEVADA TOWN

THE smelter town of Thompson, Nevada, was recently the scene of an old-time Western "shooting up of the town" at the hands of Jose Antriguo, a Mexican. Antriguo became engaged in an altercation with a fellow countryman, and in the course of the argument, he pulled a gun on his opponent and fired at him. Then he proceeded to shoot up the town in frontier style. He was finally arrested after a fight and drew a sentence of sixty days in the county jail.

Pioneer Towns of the West

Colorado Springs, Col.

A. V. Strope

Author of "Ontario, Cal.," etc.

FROM the time of its founding in 1871 Colorado Springs has been noted for the efforts of its citizens to make their town worthy of the natural advantages bestowed upon it. It lies at the foot of Pikes Peak, that snow-crowned mountain whose glories have been sung since 1806, when Lieutenant Zebulon Pike first gazed upon it. The famed Garden of the Gods is part of the unique park system of the city. And surrounding Colorado Springs are some of the most picturesque scenes in the State. Within the city, palatial hotels, wide, clean, tree-shaded streets, and imposing private and public buildings offer evidence of the fact that the residents of this Colorado resort take great pride in their community.

When, in 1871, the president of the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad Co., General W. J. Palmer, along with several associates, bought ten thousand acres along Monument Creek, the locality was an open plain without buildings of any sort. Some of the land was purchased from the United States for a dollar and a quarter an acre; the remainder was acquired from individuals who were using it for grazing cattle and sheep. General Palmer's dream was to convert the unadorned plain into a prosperous city; and, to this end, he extended the tracks of his railroad the seventy-six miles from Denver, the capital of the State, to the land that he had purchased.

Railroad construction work was done so rapidly that the first locomotive reached the town site in October, 1871. Only a log cabin, its sides plastered with mud and its roof made of dirt, met the gaze of the train crew. That cabin offered the only shelter and the only dining facilities that were to be had. Over it presided Captain Richard Sopris, a pioneer eminent in the early history of Colorado, who had taken part in the organization of numerous mining camps and in the formation of the

local governments of Denver, Jackson, Gregory, and other communities.

The building of the first private residence in Colorado Springs was begun in 1871. The contract for the erection of the first hotel was signed in the same year. And work was started on the Fountain and the Monument irrigation canals. One year after the platting of the town site, Colorado Springs had a population of seven hundred and ninety-five. Two churches and a free reading room had opened their doors to the public, while a newspaper was being published weekly in the town.

There was nothing haphazard about the planning of this municipality. Its founders gave it avenues one hundred and forty feet in width, streets one hundred feet from curb to curb, and sidewalks sixteen feet wide. Along these thoroughfares the promoters of the colony planted seven thousand cottonwoods, which they brought from distant places in order to beautify their property.

About 1873, the year when the noted English author, Charles Kingsley, lectured in Colorado Springs, the community was terrified by a threatened uprising among the Indians of the region. Two companies of volunteers were organized in Colorado Springs, and these, with one from Denver, took the trail of the redskins. At nightfall the whites came upon an Indian camp, surrounded it, then waited for daylight to give battle. But when the day came the volunteers discovered that the "hostiles" had stolen silently away—whatever Indian menace there had been was past.

So well did the founders of Colorado Springs do their work that within a few years the rapidly growing town had gained a national reputation. It soon became a fashionable resort—in 1878 it was visited by more than thirteen thousand persons, and in 1880 had a resident population of five thousand.

To-day thirty-six thousand people live in this beautiful Rocky Mountain city six thousand feet above the sea. At their service they have a public-school system that includes seventeen grade schools—twelve of which have kindergarten departments—one high school, and three junior high schools. Colorado College, an educational institution of the first rank, and the Colorado State School for the Deaf and Blind are situated within the city limits. Just outside the boundaries is the Broadmoor Art Academy, with nationally known instructors.

Six railroad lines serve Colorado Springs. The Denver & Rio Grande Western, the pioneer, has been followed by the Rock Island Railroad, the Colorado & Southern, the Santa Fe, the C., R. I. & P., and the Midland Terminal Railway. Cripple Creek, the famous gold camp, is the objective of the Midland Terminal Railway, which winds its way up Ute Pass and then to the north and west of Pikes Peak.

Excellent motor highways, including the Ocean to Ocean, the Colorado and Gulf, the Denver, and the Corley Mountain, pass through Colorado Springs. The Pikes Peak Auto Highway to the summit of that mountain is a superb engineering achievement. In many places the solid granite of the mountain was blasted to make the roadway, which is the highest in the world. The Corley Mountain Highway to Cripple Creek passes through Bear Creek Cañon and along the sides of the mountains that rise between Colorado Springs and the gold camp.

In the first paragraph of this article I mentioned the fact that the Garden of the Gods belongs to Colorado Springs. But Colorado Springs is also fortunate in possessing several other municipal parks of surpassing beauty. North Cheyenne Cañon, to the north of Mount Cutler, was presented to the city by the late General Palmer. A good road, which follows the course of Cheyenne

Creek, brings the numerous waterfalls close to the motorist who enters the cañon. The High Drive, ascending Mount Cutler and then going down into Bear Creek Cañon, is also part of the park system. It is through lovely Monument Valley Park that one enters Colorado Springs from the north, for the municipal pride of the community refuses to allow the stranger to receive a first impression of dumps and shanties, which so often mark the fringes of the most prosperous town. Within the limits of this garden gateway are located several small lakes, a free swimming pool, and a band pavilion. On the bluffs northeast of Colorado Springs is Palmer Park, six hundred acres in extent. From it one may see the Rampart Range and Pikes Peak in all their glory.

Not only is Colorado Springs a truly beautiful city. It is, as well, a renowned health resort and a Western center of wealth and culture.

PRESERVE TERRITORIAL PRISON AT YUMA

THE old territorial prison at Yuma, Arizona, on Prison Hill, just back of the new Southern Pacific Railway Station, has lately become the property of the City of Yuma, and will be preserved as a historic Western landmark.

The thick adobe walls of the old jail are still in evidence, as are the cells within, likewise the guard house and the superintendent's home on the bluff, just above the Colorado River. Steps are being taken to preserve the old prison cemetery, in which the headstones bear only the numbers of the prisoners who died while under sentence.

This old burying ground contains the remains of some of the most notorious desperadoes of the Southwest. It is expected that a good deal of new knowledge about the careers of these old-time outlaws will be obtained from the archives of the prison, and this may eventually be published.

NEW BRIDGE FOR SNAKE RIVER CANYON

THE construction of a new bridge across Snake River Cañon at Blue Lakes was started this fall, and it is hoped to begin the steel work as soon as weather conditions permit in the spring of next year. The construction operations are being handled by the Union Bridge Co. One of the difficult problems to be solved was the construction of the approaches to the new bridge from the north and south sides of the cañon. Before trucks and wagons could reach the proposed bridge site, an approach of one half mile from the south side and three and eight-tenths miles from the north side had to be prepared. The next step, after making these approaches passable, was to transport material for concrete pillars to be placed at the rim of the cañon and to get this material down to the river bed.

Footprints Under the Snow

By Ray Humphreys

Author of "A New Trick, Sure Enough," etc.

WHEN Manuel López, the Estancia Mountain sheep rancher, had attempted to speak to pretty Mildred Huston on the main street of Conejos that Sunday afternoon, it was Fred Tuttle, deputy sheriff of Conejos, who knocked the Mexican head over heels.

"I'll teach you to try to flirt with my gal," Tuttle had shouted his warning; and with that he had given López the blow on the chin that had sent the rancher spinning.

The Mexican was on his feet like a cat.

"I'll teach you," he said, whipping out a sheath knife that glittered in the sun, "to strike Manuel López like he was a dawg!'

And with that López had leaped for the deputy sheriff, swinging his shining blade in a great half arc that was aimed to end in the deputy's chest. Tuttle was too alert for that. He sidestepped, and stuck out a foot, and tripped the Mexican, who went sprawling again.

"You git outta town!" ordered the deputy sheriff hotly, as López rose to his feet; "an' ef you ever try to knife me again, or speak to a woman you do not know—I'll kill you!"

Manuel brushed himself off as several citizens rushed up to prevent further trouble between the two men. "You what?" taunted Manuel, hitching up his belt.

"I said I'd kill you," said Tuttle, his face white. "Now git fer your sheep corrals on the Estancia!'

Afterward Tuttle had escorted the frightened girl to her home, apologizing for his loss of temper.

"You know, Mildred," the unhappy deputy explained, "what Manuel's reputation is; they say he has killed many of his own people. And, when he leered at you, I saw red—that's all."

Mildred was worried, nevertheless, for days afterward; she was afraid for Tuttle, whom she was engaged to marry. If López was as bad as Tuttle had said, then there was reason to believe that he would certainly come back to town to seek revenge on the deputy sheriff. Alone, with his youthful Mexican assistant on Estancia Mountain, López would have plenty of time to brood over the affair and to plan an elaborate vengeance.

But when Mildred whispered her fears to Tuttle, he laughed, and told her to have no fear of the Mexican.

As the autumn days passed on, the incident was practically forgotten in Conejos. López came to town occasionally, sometimes accompanied by Juan, the gawky, seventeen-year-old youth that was his companion on the lonely Estancia.

And so it rested through September and until the eighth day of October, when a cattleman from the Blue Mesa came galloping into Conejos and flopped off his lathered horse in front of the office of Sheriff Tom Hartsel. The rancher went in, without knocking, and found Hartsel at his desk.

"Hullo, Baird," said Hartsel, recognizing his visitor.

"Say, Tom," burst out Baird excitedly; "just came over the Estancia, because the lower passes are choked with snow from Friday's blizzard. I went by Manuel's shack, an' stopped to say hullo to him, an' couldn't rouse him. I pushed open the door; an' thar was Manuel dead on the floor!"

The sheriff got to his feet.

"You mean——"

"Murdered," said Baird hoarsely. "Thar's a hole in his haid; but I couldn't see no gun. I came on fer you——"

"Whar's that Mexican kid he had up thar with him all summer, Baird?"

"At a ranch on the Elk," said Baird, "whar he's been workin' since he left Manuel's las' month. But say, come to think of it, Tom, I know I saw that kid down the street as I rode in jus' now."

Hartsel put on his hat; and, telling Baird to come along, the pair started down the street, their keen eyes searching for their target, the Mexican youth. While it was fairly warm and pleasant in Conejos, the mountains that hemmed in the little town were blanketed in white. The wind was drifting the snow in the high ranges, and the peaks glimmered in their icy mantles.

"Manuel's sheep will need 'tendin'," said the sheriff; "an' the kid might do it, provided——"

They came upon Juan in a restaurant, where the boy was finishing a simple lunch.

His eyes brightened at sight of the sheriff. "'Lo, sheriff," he said cordially; "me go away now; go back to Mexico. Too cold in mountains!"

The sheriff sat down alongside the boy. "Juan," he said, "when did you leave Manuel's to go to work on that ranch on Elk Creek?"

"Las' month," said the youth.

"An' when you last see Manuel, eh?"

"Las' month—why?"

"Waal," said the sheriff, "Manuel is daid; shot through the head—murdered—up thar on the Estancia; you haven't any idear, have you, Juan, who might have done it?"

"I know something bad happen," said the youth quickly, "for yes'day, as me come over th' hills, me see Deputy Sheriff Tuttle go-walkin' fast up toward the Estancia."

The sheriff made no answer because Baird, the rancher, did not give him time. "By golly," said Baird, taking off his hat, "I did see tracks o' a man leadin' to that shack, Tom, to the front door; an' say, wasn't it your deputy, Tuttle, that made that crack about croakin' López a while back?"

When the silent Hartsel and Baird and Juan returned to the sheriff's office, it had been agreed that nothing was to

be said to Tuttle, who had remained at home that day complaining of a cold. Picking up the telephone, Hartsel called his deputy and told him to report at once, as something had happened. Then the sheriff called the coroner and several other Conejos citizens.

"Ef it was Tuttle," said the sheriff drearily, "it was all because o' that Mildred Huston!"

When Tuttle reported, a few minutes later, he found a grim assemblage in the sheriff's inner office. The sheriff motioned him to a chair, and then, softly, asked him a leading question.

"Were you on the Estancia yes'day, Fred?"

The deputy hesitated only the fraction of a second. "Yes," he answered, "that's how come I got this cold!"

"Where did you go, Fred?"

"I went to López's shack," said the deputy, with downcast eyes; "but I couldn't find him—he wasn't thar!"

"Did you look in—into the cabin, Fred?"

"No," said the deputy.

"Waal," said the sheriff, and his voice shook, "I guess it's my plain duty, Fred, to place you under arrest. López has been murdered, an' you was seen on the Estancia, an' you likewise admit that you was thar."

The deputy stood up, his face the picture of horror. "López dead?" he echoed. "An' me charged with it—why, boss, that's ridiculous; I went up thar to say I'd been unnecessary nasty in that fight months ago. You see, Mildred has been askin' me to. Why, I never killed him, boss! I couldn't."

"Let's see your gun, Fred!"

The deputy handed over his weapon; and the sheriff broke it expertly, revealing one empty shell in the cylinder. Tuttle answered that question before the sheriff could ask it.

"I shot at a rabbit," he said.

WE When news of the killing of López and the arrest of Deputy Sheriff Fred Tuttle spread through Conejos, that evening, there was great consternation. Tuttle was popular; and there were many who declared that López was better dead. But—every one, it seemed, remembered that Tuttle had once told López that he would kill him. There was no question, in Conejos, but that Tuttle had killed him.

"He'll git off light, though," said Tuttle's friends, discussing the case, "fer he can claim self-defense; a few years in the pen at most—perhaps nuthin' at all."

But Tuttle, in the tiny Conejos jail, protested his innocence to all callers that night—and particularly to Mildred, who had come down at the first news of her sweetheart's trouble.

"I tell you I didn't do it," averred the deputy, pacing back and forth in the jail office, where Sheriff Hartsel had told him to remain "until further orders" from him. "I'll bet a dollar that López killed himself. Mebbe he was dead when I was thar; but I never thought to open the door—or to try it. If he was killed, some one else killed him. I'm innocent!"

But his friends, going away, shook their heads. "Why doesn't he admit it an' say he killed him in self-defense?" they asked each other.

Only Mildred took Tuttle's word.

"I believe you, Fred," she whispered, her arms around him. "I know you didn't kill him ef you say you didn't."

"I went up thar yes'day fer you," said Tuttle miserably, "to try to straighten things out. But mebbe Tom will bring back good news when he comes."

However, when Hartsel did return, he brought no good news. He came in and put his hand on Tuttle's shoulder. "Fred, you shouldn't have done it," he said, by way of prelude.

Then he explained to the group in the jail office. "López is daid; shot through the forehead—couldn't have been suicide; there's no gun thar. Foot-

prints leadin' up to the front door and leadin' away again—Fred's—an', no other footprints thar, anywhar."

Conejos accepted it that way—as a dead open-and-shut case. And those who liked the deputy sheriff sought to urge him to admit his guilt and put up an adequate defense.

"I'll admit nothing—seein' I never did it. Ef I did go to do that, wouldn't I be smart enough to disguise my tracks? I tell you I'm innocent!"

And then, in turn, Tuttle besought his friends to aid him by discovering the real murderer; but they laughed at such requests, winked at him, and otherwise indicated that they knew that he was just "foolin'" in asking such things.

Only the girl, Mildred, took Fred at his word. But even she did not tell him so, fearing that he might forbid her to undertake to solve the crime. So, without his knowledge, she rode to the deserted shack on the Estancia three days after Fred's arrest. There she found things as the sheriff had described them. There were many tracks now, about the front door, where the sheriff and his men had removed the body of the dead Mexican—but leading off from the mass of tracks was a single line of footprints, which the girl readily identified as those of Tuttle's. She measured them to find that they did coincide with the measurements of Tuttle's boots.

Entering the cabin, later, Mildred searched it for some clew of the murderer, but found none. There, on the bare pine floor, was the crimson spot where López had died. The cabin was poorly furnished; and, as the girl ransacked it, searching for she knew not what, she came upon López's bank book, lying, face down, and open, in a drawer of a makeshift bureau. She opened it—to discover on it the telltale mark of a bloody thumb print. That was evidence, but of what? Perhaps the thumb print was López's—or Fred's!

"Fred didn't kill him," Mildred kept repeating to herself as she searched on, through the cabin; "but who did?"

The search completed, the girl stepped to the rear of the tiny kitchen in the back portion of the shack, and flung open the door, expecting to be greeted with an unbroken carpet of snow—but, instead, there was the sandy mountain loam, dry as in the warmest days of August. The cabin, facing the northwest, had acted as a sort of windbreak in the teeth of the blizzard and the wind, howling around the peak, had piled the snow against the end of the shack, but whisked it away from the rear as though some mountain giant had wielded a great broom.

The wind had cleared a veritable path from the rear of López's shack along a line of crags and down the leeward side of the Estancia.

It was late that afternoon when Mildred returned to Conejos, her pony tired and his hoofs hurt from the rocks. The girl went straight to the sheriff's office, stopping only long enough to wrap a bundle at her home. At the jail she merely spoke to Tuttle, who sat in a cell, his head in his hands. In a neighboring cell rested Juan, the sheepherder, who was being held as a witness.

"Sheriff," said the girl to Hartsel, "I've spent the whole day on the Estancia—and I've found something interesting. Whoever killed Manuel López killed him for money!"

Hartsel shook his head. "I don't blame Fred fer doin' it," the old sheriff remonstrated kindly; "but he ain't no thief, Milly."

"Fred?" asked the girl. "Who said Fred?" And with that she produced the bank book, with its telltale imprint.

The sheriff looked at it with puckered brow, but finally put it down impatiently. "The only man up thar, 'cordin' to tracks, was Fred," said Hartsel; "an' ef López hisself didn't make that thumb print on thar I think we had better fergit to find out who did!"

The meaning of his remark was plain.

But the girl laughed at him—and that surprised Hartsel, who was in no mood for laughing himself. At the girl's insistence, however, he went out and fetched in Juan, the Mexican youth, who was impatient to be on his way, court trial or no court trial.

"Juan," said the sheriff, "Miss Huston wants to ask you something."

"Whar were you, Juan," she asked, "when you saw Mr. Tuttle on the Estancia that day?"

"On the west side," said Juan, "comin' up from Elk Creek. I saw him far up the mountain, goin' up an' up."

"But you left no tracks down thar on the west slope," said the girl.

"Wind," he said, "sweep all snow away—leave no tracks."

The girl relaxed and sat back, as though she had scored a great victory, but neither the question nor the answer had meant much to poor old Hartsel.

At length the girl spoke again. "You wore those moccasins, Juan, that day?" she asked.

"*Si,*" said the boy quietly.

"Then," said Mildred, with a quickening smile, "you were on the south of the mountain that day, too, weren't you, Juan? An' perhaps you lost this on the way down?"

Unloosing a string, the girl spread the bundle out on the table; and there rested a large revolver—blue-black.

"Manuel's gun!" said the sheriff excitedly. "Whar did you find that, gal? I'd know it in a million, an' I couldn't find it in th' shack."

"Found it in the willows, down on the south side of the Estancia," said Mildred, smiling, "right alongside of Juan's tracks. I found his tracks starting more than a mile from the back of López's shack. I couldn't find them closer, for the wind had swept him a clear path from the cabin to the crags an' part way down the mountain. Juan, it was you who killed López!"

"No," said the youth.

But the sheriff, saying nothing, reached over, seized Juan's left hand, and jabbed Juan's thumb into the open inkwell; then he planked the inky thumb down on a scratch pad on the table. The first impression was wet and smudgy. The second one was clear. Very dramatically, then, the sheriff opened the bank book to the page where the bloody thumb print was.

"I killed him," cried Juan.

Then the Mexican youth told how he had gone to López's shack to demand money due him as wages, and how Manuel had lifted a piece of firewood to hurl at him. Juan had noticed the sheepman's gun on the table. He picked it up and fired, and Manuel fell dead. Then the boy had searched the shack; and, while doing that, he had seen the deputy sheriff trudging up through the snow. Juan had waited until Tuttle had gone—and then Juan had slipped out the back door, leaving the same way as he had come, along the ledge, swept clear of snow.

"I saw the tracks Tuttle made," he said; "an' I thought I'd blame it all on him, supposin' him bein' the law that nobody would blame him fer killin' López. I never thought he'd be arrested. It was only to save myself, señorita, that I——"

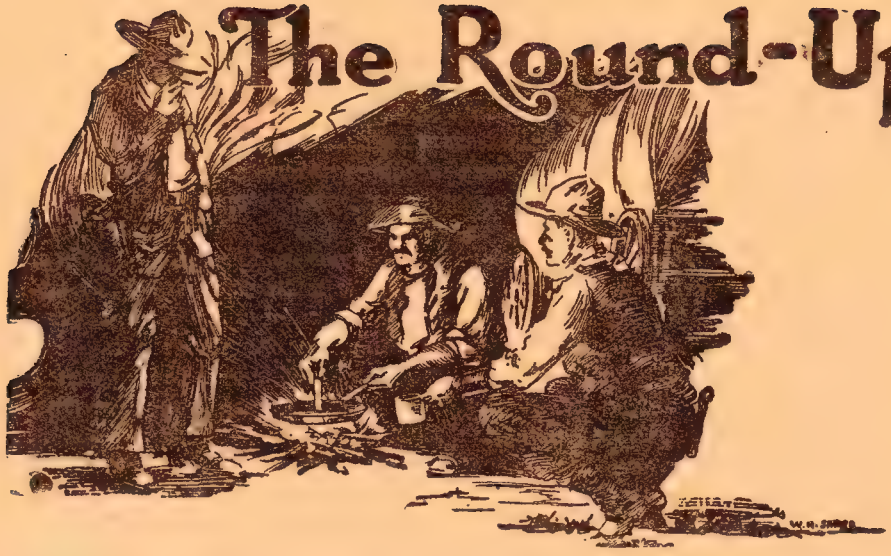
The sheriff nodded thoughtfully.

"It is well that the señorita here loved Fred," he said; "fortunate that thar was one person in town who couldn't believe Fred guilty. I didn't want to, but I was forced to think so—seein' the case seemed *mucho claro.* As fer you, Juan, I guess you can take Fred's place when the case comes up."

Hartsel got up and opened the door leading into the jail.

"Hey, Fred," he called, "what do you mean, roostin' out thar in that jail when the purtiest an' the smartest gal in Conejos is waitin' in here to tell you something important?"

The Round-Up



DON'T know what it is about cats that makes us dislike them, but we are told most men feel that way. It is just something about them that, as the kids say, gives us the "squiggles." Now, there is nothing we can put our finger on in a cat that would make her distasteful to us. Poor pussy is not only an inexpensive pet, but, on the other hand, as the nursery-book story says, "kills the rats in papa's barn."

However, we've sure got one cute kitten in the barn, and it is about her that we're goin' to speak. This particular pussy is a small black one that wandered onto the place about a week ago and was adopted by one of the hired hands who sleeps "in papa's barn." Maybe the rats were bothering him, and he thought little pussy would keep them away. But we must get down to the story. 'Member the colt we told you we broke last summer—and, by the way, he is coming fine—well, the minute you turn the kitty loose in the horse stable—we've nothin' but those box stalls with Dutch doors—she claws her way up the side of the colt's box-stall door and perches on the top. The minute the colt sees her, he comes to the door and noses her over. Kitty doesn't give the colt time to do this long, because she is cold and she wants to get warm, and this is the way she does it: She springs for that colt's neck, runs nimbly down his mane, over his withers, and onto the broad of his back, where she curls up and is soon purring in the cozy tone that her kind gives voice to from the rug before the fire. Now, ain't that a cute kitten?

While we are talking about that colt, you'll recollect that we kinda blew a bit of how we broke him so quick and easy. We did break him quick, and we did break him easy, and when we say anybody that can ride to amount to anything is safe on his back to-day, we want you to know it is no horse-dealer talk, but a fact. However, we must confess that we have learned that the sire of this horse, although an imported thoroughbred, which generally means a pretty lively bit of horseflesh, is very docile, and his get are much in demand for their docility and readiness to accept the will of man. Of course, we don't want you to get the impression from this that this here colt is any dead one, for he is far from being that, but he sure does learn easy and acts

kind. And one thing more about him, his ma—dam, in other words—is like his old man in that she is powerful, friendly and obedient to man. So, you see, perhaps we weren't quite so clever as we thought.

Here comes Harley Diltz, otherwise "The Lucky Kid," from Route 5, Asheville, North Carolina.

"HELLO Boss: I find a great many interesting items in the Round-up which I believe I value as much as the stories, if not more. I've been carrying around just such a little item for a good many years, and I thought that it might interest some one else.

"I believe it was in the fall of 1902 that I made my third trip to Colorado. There I got my introduction to mining by watching miners who were out of work panning gold on Jackson's Bar. It was after the great western federation strike, and the men working claimed they were able to make two dollars and two and a half dollars per day panning. I thought that wonderful, since the gravel and stone had been worked intermittently since 1858.

"I worked in the mines through that section for several years, and was then recalled to my old home, the town of Wymore in southeastern Nebraska, by the death of my mother. One day while there I was talking to an old gentleman by the name of Wilkins, the father of a boyhood friend of mine. I had never heard him mention mines or mining. He asked me what part of Colorado I had been mining in.

"Then he told me a tale which I think would interest you. He said: 'When I was a boy about nineteen years old I worked with a man by the name of Gregory, who was mining on a little creek west of Denver.' He described this creek and the hills and the man so closely that I knew it to be Clear Creek. Gregory was the one who discovered gold on that creek, and also the man who first discovered that there was a lode, or solid vein of ore, between two walls.

"My friend said that Gregory would locate claims and sell them for ten thousand dollars each, and that each buyer would pay him one thousand dollars per week out of what they took from the claims. Besides, Gregory was taking immense quantities of gold dust from claims which he was working himself. This gentleman said he stayed with Gregory until he had an attack of mountain fever. Gregory, seeing that he was ill, handed him a bag of gold dust and bade him leave the mountains as quickly as he could get out of there. He had never heard anything further concerning Gregory.

"Then I told him what little I'd heard of Gregory: how he worked up into Blackhawk; particulars of how he discovered the great 'Bob-tail Gregory' mines; how he went on from there to Central City and Russell Gulch. Then I told how he walked out of there broke, with a pack on his back, and how his skeleton was found a year or two later where he had starved to death.

"My friend was greatly surprised to learn that he had worked with such a historical figure.

"Of course, I came long after Gregory's time, but I discovered a jewel on Clear Creek more precious than all of Gregory's gold. It was in the one-time capital of Colorado—Golden. This jewel has multiplied fourfold. One little jewel has gone to bed, and two have gone to a basket-ball game, and one has gone to a picture show."

Comes now, Carroll Patterson, Whitewood, South Dakota; coaches, mostly, is what he talks about.

"DEAR BOSS AND FOLKS: Slip aside, boys, and let a combination rancher and farmer gab a while. I want to say a

word or two about Ray Humphrey's 'Six-mule Ride.' I don't object to the stories about the Black Hills, because I was born and raised in them, and I've known and seen the old Deadwood Stagecoach for nineteen years—I'm not yet twenty.

"At the 'Days of '76 Celebration' we do have a holdup of the stagecoach. But that ain't the point. The Deadwood Stagecoach is a relic of the Black Hills, Deadwood in particular, and it hasn't been out of the Black Hills for as long as I can remember. Right to-day it is in Deadwood Amusement Park where the holdup is staged.

"That stagecoach has never been used in Los Gatos, or San Luis Valley, or any other town on the border. Neither is our celebration a rodeo. It is merely the 'Days of '76' and is for the miners, in honor of Deadwood's and Lead's gold mines.

"There is not a Mexican ranch or rancher within five hundred miles of here. I haven't anything against the Mexicans; what few have drifted through here are fine fellows. I only want to say that I hope people will write of the Black Hills instead of the border States when mentioning the Deadwood Stagecoach.

"To explain about the coach. It was used back in '76 to take mail and people from Deadwood to Spearfish—the two main towns in those days. Later Buffalo Bill used it in his Wild West Shows in the East and in England, et cetera. Since then it has been in the Black Hills.

"Come on out and see the 'Days of '76' next year. We have Sioux Indians, trick ropers, riders, cavalry drills, holdups, races and other events.

"Well, it's time to pull out, so me and my roan horse will beat it. Pardons to Mr. Humphreys."

Carl Jackson, Box 135, Reward, California, says if you want some real dope from an old-timer, write to him. Here is what he has to say about horses.

"Boss and Folks: A regular real horse—for saddle or collar—should not be caught up until he is five years old, and six is better. By this time his wind and strength are developed, and only a fool can break either his constitution or his spirit.

"Horses I will always consider very much like men. Show me a job where the boss is easy, and I'll show you a place where everything is slipshod, the men are disgusted with the job, the boss, and themselves. So it is with the horse. If he respects you, he will be a lot more careful and alert than if he thinks he can get by. So I say the Spanish bit, the sharp spur, and the quirt, if properly and seldom used, are the kindest treatment a horse can get, and if a horse could talk he would agree with me."

Here is A. I. Reader, with a question. We tell him and all such to write to Coe, care of this magazine. Coe is a great authority on ropes and ropin'. 'Course, we'd also be glad to have any of you other fellows help him out with some information on twisting the manila.

"Boss and Folks: I have been a reader of the Western Story Magazine for several years and would like to say that it is the best magazine I have e'er read.

"I have tried several different ways to harden a rope for throwing and spinning, but have had very little success, as the rope still insists on kinking.

"I hope that some kind reader will hear my plea, and pass the necessary dope on this rope question."

Miss Helen Rivers, who conducts this department, will see to it that you will be able to make friends with other readers, though thousands of miles may separate you. It must be understood that Miss Rivers will undertake to exchange letters only between men and men, boys and boys, women and women, girls and girls. Letters will be forwarded direct when correspondents so wish; otherwise they will be answered here. Be sure to inclose forwarding postage when sending letters through The Hollow Tree.

THE Owl has just been commenting to The Big Sister of The Hollow Tree Crowd on this last batch of letters from our gangsters. What the wise old Owl advises, folks, is longer and more descriptive letters to The Tree, for he knows that the best letters bring the best pen pals, every time! Now, brothers and sisters of The Tree, you all have something to say, I'm sure, that we all want to hear, so take your pens in hand and let's make this a red-letter year for the Old Holla! Remember—bigger and better letters! More and more pals!

Here are some of the letters that we found in this batch of mail.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: I have been what you would call a roamer. I've seen much of the country—have traveled by auto, horseback, freight train, and have walked some! I know quite a bit about cattle as well as bronchos. And I've a lot of time on my hands that I'd like to devote to answering letters, if the Gangsters are willing. Any one who thinks that I won't answer quickly—let 'im try me! Am thirty, and red-headed. Let's go!

TEX.

Care of The Tree.

Here's another hombre who's chosen the good old winter time to ride cross country with his message to us.

DEAR MISS RIVERS AND GANG: I doubt whether there are any of the old cowboys who do not read WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE. Certainly none that I know of.

I have a little message for some of the old-timers, particularly those who lived in the Indian country. When a boy, I cooked on a cow ranch in Dakota Territory. In my spare time I was in the corral throwing a rope at a snubbing post, and later on at something more active. Still later I wrangled horses, the night herd, and later took my place on the old Circle T Ranch as a regular cow hand. In '86, '87, and '88 I was foreman of the Okoboji Ranch.

During all this time I lived on the edge of the Sioux Reservation. I learned some of the Sioux language, but I also learned that when other tribesmen came to visit the Sioux they generally talked by gestures, the sign language. As there are seventy-six different Indian vocal languages in America, and I could not learn them all, I decided that the best way to converse with all the seventy-six would be by learning the Indian sign language, which I did. While the Indians were very willing to teach their spoken tongue, they were at that time greatly averse to teaching sign, and it took me ten years to get it all. I have followed up with research along this

line for thirty years since I left the range, and can give any information wanted about the seven hundred and sixty-one words that comprise the sign language. Will be only too glad to hear from anybody who is interested in sign language, and to give him all the information about it that he may want. Write me. WILLIAM TOMKINS.

342 West C Street, San Diego, California.

Max Coleman, an old-time cowman of Lubbock, Texas, rides up to say some nice things about California.

DEAR HOLLOW TREE GANG: I am a native of Texas; and when I reached California, so far as I know I did not have any acquaintances nearer than Cheyenne, Wyoming. Following my usual policy in hunting work, I immediately started looking for one of the most influential men I could hear of; but before I found him, I accidentally passed a place where men were wanted, and the next day I was on the pay roll. I repeated this experience in San Francisco, and never at any time did I have any trouble in going to work. I was always treated well. After having traveled through every State in the Union, worked and mixed with all kinds of people, I believe I am capable of making that statement regarding the Golden State. I love California, and intend to die there. MAX COLEMAN.

Lubbock, Texas.

These winter days seem to put a lot of vim into our Gangsters. Here's one who's come all the way from Panama to volunteer as deputy:

DEAR MISS RIVERS: What is this I hear? A call for volunteer deputies? Then put me down as the deputy for this part of the world, Panama.

I will be glad to answer all letters either in quest of information or just friendly letters from pen friends, as I am very lonely down here. HARRY CHALMERS.

Fort Sherman, Canal Zone.

A sister deputy:

DEAR GANGSTERS ALL: The other day I received a letter from our Big Sister, telling me that I had been appointed a deputy for New York State. You have no idea how pleased I was to think that I was going to do something real, at last, to help. I think that there are two things we should not be lax about, Gangsters—answering our letters, and wearing our badges. We should not only wear our Hollow Tree emblems sometimes, but always! And we should answer all letters promptly. I shall be very glad to hear from the members at all times, for I feel that I am at your service twenty-four hours a day, Gangsters!

FLORENZE P. OSTEYEE.

Mineville, New York.

"I have never regretted the twenty-five cents for my coat-lapel badge," says Lonesome Buckeye, care of The Tree.

You will have regrets if you don't send for a badge. Twenty-five cents in stamps or coin sent to The Hollow Tree, Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City, will bring you either a button for your coat lapel, or a pin. In ordering, be sure to state which you wish.

A brother Gangster wants to hear from some real old-timers.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: I would like to have some real men, forty and under in age, who are at present on the ranges, correspond with me. To date I have yet to have a letter from any of that caliber. I sure will answer every letter, and will make each one so interesting that every hombre will be sore at himself for not getting my number sooner.

IRVING SCHAEFER.

Darfur, Minnesota.

Tune in on this S O S, Gangsters.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: This is a S O S call from a lonesome soldier—for letters and more letters. I have been a roamer most all of my life, worked at most anything from street-car conductor to police, both State and city; also was in the navy for two years. At present, I am a soldier in the medical department of the United States army, stationed at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, one of the historic places in Pennsylvania. We have quarters where the old Carlisle Indian school used to be.

I sure would like to hear from every one; and if the members of the U. S. S. *Houston* who were in the Black Gang during the war will write to me, I'll never forget it. GUST.

Care of The Tree.

"I am a soldier and have served in India, Turkey, Palestine, the Sudan, and

Egypt," writes Driver S. O. Fenton, 1415525, 1st Pack Battery R. A., Helmieh Camp, Cairo, Egypt. He has a camera and will exchange snapshots. He is twenty-five, and his home is in the north of England.

"If there are any of the Hollow Tree Gang who would like to know about the Yosemite National Park, I'll be only too glad to inform them," writes Frank Jewell, 1322 Castillo Street, Santa Barbara, California.

From Haynesville, Louisiana.

DEAR GANG: Been plannin' to drop in on you folks for a right smart spell now, but I'm a born procrastinator. Hope I'm welcome, though, now that I'm here!

I'd like to have some of you tell me how far west and north pecan trees live and do well. And do any of you Gangsters have fifty or seventy-five acres of sandy land that you want to dispose of—land with clay about two or three feet below the surface? You see, I want land of that sort for a pecan orchard, so if you have just what I want just where it ought to be, I'll surely appreciate hearing from you on the subject.

I'm twenty-one, and would also like to hear from girls who live on ranches.

MRS. H. L. DU BOIS.
Box 541, Haynesville, Louisiana.

Now, folks, don't shake your heads and say that it's too early to begin thinking of motor camping. I know that it's winter, but, then, the spring will be upon us before we know it, and it is best to begin making plans early. And just as soon as you have some ideas in your heads as to what you want to do this spring, let us know, for it takes a while to get the messages into The Tree, you know.

DEAR GANG: It may be that some of you are interested in motor camping; and, if so, I would be glad to aid those interested and give such advice as would be desired for the short trip and the long tour. I have made numerous trips east and south of Chicago as far as Tampa, Florida. I'll be glad to hear from all outdoor folks, and will answer as promptly as possible. The sport of camping is becoming more and more popular each year; and I'd be glad to get tips on motor camping and touring from some of the veteran trail blazers, and would pass the advice on to the recruits.

How about it, old-timers? I hope to hear from first trippers and the old vets, and wish all luck at the next turn in the road.

F. J. HEIM.
6329 Stewart Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

New England is heard from.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: I have just come from a farm into a good-sized city; in fact, the largest city in Connecticut. This is my native State, and we have some very pretty scenery, as well as many fine beaches.

I notice that there are a very few of what may be termed middle-aged people who contribute to The Hollow Tree; but I feel that there must be some who, like myself, are nature lovers, and who would like congenial correspondents. I shall be pleased to hear from members who are around middle life or younger.

EVA KNAPP COOLEY.
219 Sherman Avenue, New Haven, Connecticut.

Betty, in care of the Tree, is very much interested in Western life and would like to correspond with some one on a ranch in Arizona or southern Colorado.

Mrs. S. J. Willis, Coffee, Trinity County, California, has hiked and worked her way all over this country and wants to try the other side next year. She is seeking a companion, some one her own age—she is thirty-eight—to go with her. She would prefer a comrade who is musically inclined, and who is alone in life. Her pal must, of course, be fond of the outdoors.

Wandering Will, care of The Tree, is planning a prospecting trip to Alaska in the spring, and wants a lot of information as well as a good partner. He is twenty years old and can stand a lot of hard work.

R. W. H., in care of The Tree, wants to hear from all nature lovers, and especially from fellow "hitch-hikers" everywhere. He promises to tell a good yarn.

WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE

By John North

It is our aim in this department to be of genuine practical help and service to those who wish to make use of it. Don't hesitate to write to us and give us the opportunity of assisting you to the best of our ability.

Address all communications to John North, care of WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

RIVERS OF THE WEST—THE AMERICAN

THE mention of this river brings to mind the days of the Forty-niners and the mad rush to California of the gold seekers, for it was on the headwaters of this stream that gold was first discovered in the region. Ten years before the discovery, Captain Sutter had arrived in San Francisco and inquired all around for a guide to take him up the Sacramento River, but could find none. He set out in a rowboat and in eight days reached the mouth of the river, where two friendly Indians guided him to the American River. He landed close to the site on which the city of Sacramento now stands, on August 12, 1839. With three white companions and a few Indians, he built an adobe house. And as a protection against warlike Indians, he surrounded his home with an adobe wall on which he mounted small cannon. Thus it became Sutter Fort, and the hospitality of its owner brought many settlers to the land.

On January 24, 1848, occurred the event which startled the whole world. Sutter had acquired wealth from his big herds, his grazing lands and his trading post. But sawed lumber was scarce, so he sent James W. Marshall scouting for a good mill location. On the south fork of the American River, conditions were found to be ideal. Water and timber were at hand, logs were felled, cabins erected, the mill frame started and the mill race dug out. Then came the surprise. Two hundred yards below the mill, Marshall picked up the first gold nugget!

The two men agreed to keep the matter a profound secret, pool their interests, work their holdings quietly and bank the output. But the news leaked out that gold had been found on Sutter's land. And it was not long before

the cry rang around the world, and crowds came flocking from all points of the compass. Old and young, rich and poor, good and bad, all came with one thought—to get gold.

It was a gold-maddened mob, irrepressible and unmanageable. Sutter's own men deserted him—taking his tools, his wagons and his provisions with them, leaving his grain unthrashed and laughing at him in derision, when he begged them to stay until he could get other help. There was no attraction in working as a ranch hand at forty dollars a month, when over a thousand dollars could be washed out with a pan in a single day. So men spurned the gold near at hand and rushed off to richer fields.

The discovery that should have made Sutter rich pauperized him. His stock was stolen, his hides were left to rot in the tannery, his millstones were carried away, and his mill was a total loss. The gold hysteria knew no law—friends became foes, and rivals became murderers. The American River, hitherto almost entirely unknown became famous throughout the whole world as the objective of the gold seekers.

Towns sprang up quickly in the vicinity of the gold fields, and were given fantastic names according to their dominant characteristics. One place became so prosperous and so lawless, with so many consequent hangings, that the settlement was named Hangtown—the famous tree that served as a gallows is still standing and is visited by many tourists. This is now the busy town of Placerville. It is still a gold-mining section, but has other industries, including dairying, lumbering, fruit and stock raising. Its lawlessness is a thing of the past, perhaps because the lawbreakers were put out of the way in the old days and none were left.

The American River still yields gold, and huge dredgers operate twelve miles from Sacramento, taking thousands of dollars' worth of the precious metal from the soil of Sacramento County. The river is now more famous for its scenic beauty than for its gold deposits. It flows into the Sacramento River near the city of that name, flowing through deep cañons and through a country that is now quite accessible to all.

On February 22, 1863, the first spadeful of earth was shoveled in Sacramento for the construction of the Central Pacific Railway, which was built in spite of tremendous obstacles and difficulties. Immense stretches of snowsheds had to be erected through the mountains, and thousands of feet of tunnel had to be driven through solid rock. Cliffs thousands of feet high had to be surveyed, and a roadway blasted out. Many men were killed and the difficulties seemed to be insurmountable. But they were gradually overcome, and on May 10, 1869, at Promontory Point, Utah, Senator Stanford drove the gold spike that united the East and the West.

Sacramento had accomplished the seemingly impossible task of conquering the high Sierras at an altitude of over seven thousand feet, defying its heaviest snows and its terrific landslides. Travel to the East and West was opened to all, and the region of the American River became the objective of home seekers instead of gold seekers, men who now plant and then dig wealth from the soil that yields rich harvests of fruit and grain more precious than the gold of the days of '49.

SUPERSTITION MOUNTAINS

DEAR MR. NORTH: Please let me know where the Superstition Mountains are located and how I could go there. G. L.
Los Angeles, California.

This is a very desolate and little-visited mountain group on the desert ad-

joining the Imperial Valley. From Brawley or Imperial, you could make a trip to these mountains, but it would have to be in the company of an experienced desert traveler who has thorough knowledge of the region. Otherwise, you are apt to find yourself in trouble. Probably you can find some one to take you on the trip at one of the towns I have mentioned.

The mountains are of curious formation and surrounded by a sandy desert country that is difficult to traverse The Indians always regarded the Superstitions with awe, partly because of the constant changes wrought in their appearances by the shifting of the sands. It will be an interesting trip, especially if you use proper precautions when you set out.

MASKED BANDIT'S EXPLOIT

THAT the lone bandit with mask and gun is still a factor to be reckoned with in some places in the West was demonstrated recently in the holdup of the night operator of the Oregon Short Line Railway at Brigham City, Utah.

The operator was at his desk in the depot talking over the telephone to the dispatcher at Salt Lake City, when the masked bandit appeared suddenly at the trainmen's register window and covered him with his gun, demanding that he throw up his hands. The holdup man then demanded the cash that the operator had on hand, and after obtaining a little more than fifty dollars from the cash drawer, he disappeared into the darkness. The sheriff and other peace officers were notified and got on the trail of the mysterious bandit.

YOSEMITE WIGWAMS HAVE RADIO

THE Indian settlement one half mile east of the new Yosemite village, not far from Half Dome, is enjoying its first radio set. This is an innovation for the Indians of Yosemite. They have adopted many of the white man's modern frills, such as automobiles, movies, cosmetics, bobbed hair, et cetera, but hitherto, they have not gone into the mysteries of radio. It is reported that the influence of the younger members of the tribe had a great deal to do with inducing Chief Ungwah-too-tah to decide to have a radio set installed at the Indian village. In fact, the younger generation is said to have forced the adoption of the innovation, known to the older Indians as the "noise box." It is thought that radio will soon compete with the old tribal dances as the favorite diversion of the Yosemite red men.

After the Round-up is over, each week Prosper Buranelli will select for readers of WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE a couple of tricky problems that will make them get out their pencils and go to it. What kind of puzzle do you like the best? Write and tell us. Send in a puzzle and show us. Maybe you can concoct the one that will make WESTERN STORY readers quit cold.

I HATE to do this. It's going to give you great trouble and perplexity of mind. But when you've done it—or looked at the answer next week—you can pass it on to the next guy and stump him. That's what those tricky stunts are for. Well, here goes. See the picture? The old scout was telling them:

"You've got to draw four straight lines," he said. "You've got to draw them without taking the pencil from the paper. You're not allowed to retrace any part of a line. And your lines have got to touch every one of the nine dots. When you've done that your four straight lines will make a design. That is the magic sign. Take it and show it to the Indian chief, and he will take you to the place where the gold mine is."

That's what you are required to do—without taking pencil from paper or retracing any line, draw four lines that touch every one of the nine dots.

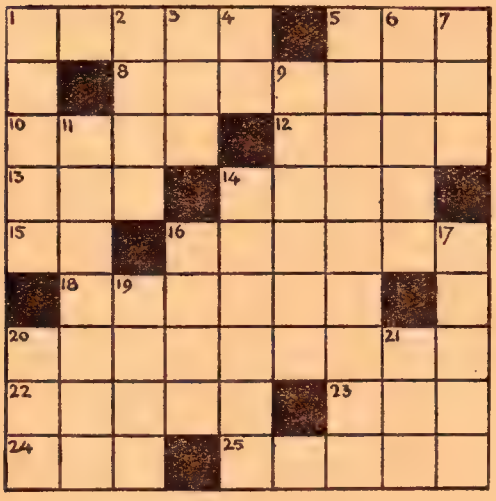
Like enigmas? Well, here goes! Guess the words defined and fill in the letters according to the numbers given with the definitions. You will find below the numbers, 1, 2, 3, and so on, written out, so that you can fill in above them.

I am two verses of an old coon song.

My 32, 33, 34, 37, 36, 35 is a fastener.
My 41, 42, 43, 44 is a fish.
My 38, 39, 45 is a plaything.
My 21, 40, 35, 25 is completed.
My 27, 28, 29, 15 is talk idly.
My 19, 20, 6, 7 is whip.
My 17, 10, 9, 14 is overdaring.
My 13, 16, 23, 24 is a slang exclamation.
My 11, 12, 30, 31 is slang for a rustic.
My 4, 5, 1 is a gift.
My 2, 8, 26 agrees with you.
My 18, 4, 3, 13, 22 is quarrelsome.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32
33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40
41	42	43	44	45	46	47	

One of our contributors, Mrs. Margaret Johnstone, has managed to get a couple of tremendously southwestern words in her construction, which is very much of a cross-word puzzle. Making up these X-word wild and woolies is getting to be a fine art. Observe Horizontal 20 and vertical 5.



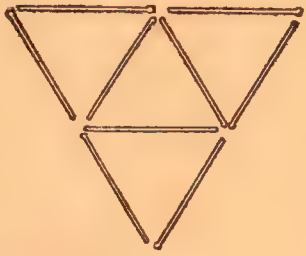
HORIZONTAL.

1—First—combining form.
5—Feline.
8—Substance used in beautifying eyelids.
10—Sound signifying "get away."
12—Musical instrument.
13—Man's name.
14—Spanish name which together with "San" is applied to a tribe of Central American Indians.
15—Hesitant syllable.
16—Angered.
18—Line that curves toward a center.
20—Person whose parents belong to different races.
22—Semiprecious stone.
23—Make of automobile.
24—Lair.
25—Entrances.

VERTICAL.

1—Adhesive substance.
2—Personage in Moslem church.
3—Woven floor piece.
4—Bone (Latin).
5—Gentleman (Spanish).
6—Got up.
7—Digit.
9—Neckpiece.
11—Bodice.
14—Fitted with a sharp point.
16—Something donated.
17—Extinct birds.
19—Design, arrangement.
20—Possessed.
21—Always (contraction).

Last week's answers:



Cryptic Terms:
El Paso.
Lariat.

Word Square:

P A C E D
A D O R E
C O R O T
E R O D E
D E T E R

Hidden Nations:

Persia, France, Peru, Liberia, Chile, Canada, Mexico.

MISSING

This department conducted in duplicate in DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE and WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE, thus giving readers double service, is offered free of charge to our readers. Its purpose is to aid them in getting in touch with persons of whom they have lost track.

While it will be better to use your name in the notice, we will print your request "blind" if you prefer. In sending "blind" notices, you must, of course, give us your right name and address, so that we can forward promptly any letters that may come for you. We reserve the right to reject any notice that seems to us unsuitable. Because "copy" for a magazine must go to the printer long in advance of publication, don't expect to see your notice till a considerable time after you send it.

If it can be avoided, please do not send us a "General Delivery" post-office address, for experience has proved that those persons who are not specific as to address often have mail that we send them returned to us marked "not found." It would be well, also, to notify us of any change in your address.

Now, readers, help those whose friends or relatives are missing, as you would like to be helped if you were in a similar position.

WARNING.—Do not forward money to any one who sends you a letter or telegram, asking for money "to get home," et cetera, until you are absolutely certain that the author of such telegram or letter is the person you are seeking.

BERRY, LESTER L.—We could be so happy together, so please don't be cruel. I want you to come back, for I cannot live without you. Anna Berry, 321 West Ninth Street, North Platte, Nebraska.

BECKMYER, GEORGE.—Formerly of East Federal Street, Baltimore, Maryland. About forty-three, dark, slender. Good news for him if he writes to his old pal, Murphy, care of this magazine.

DAVIS, NORMAN KELLY.—From San Antonio, but last heard of in Dallas. I have written Vitra Place, but received no reply. And I do want to hear from you. Jack R., 1206 Lagonda Avenue, Springfield, Ohio.

NOTICE.—Any one knowing of twin boys, adopted from the children's home at Richmond, Virginia, in October, 1923, please write the undersigned as he knows of something to their advantage. The children were five months old at the time of adoption. G. G., Box 223, Marshall, Illinois.

GOODMAN, MRS. CLAY.—Name was Jordan before her marriage. In 1912, she was living near Leachville, Arkansas. Please write me. Mrs. Lillian Wise, Frankfort Heights, Illinois.

PETRICEK, GEORGE.—A fisherman in East Moline, Illinois, when last heard of. Please communicate with your brother, Frank Petricek, 1301 Frederick Street, Racine, Wisconsin.

PEMBERTON, ALLAN.—Remember K127 and K227, and write your friend, who last heard of you in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. Stanley V. Gray, General Delivery, Utica, New York.

BEN R. or G. K.—Please write to me through Hallie. We need you terribly. Sis.

SANDERS, SAM.—Last heard of in Montreal, Canada. Please communicate with your daughter, Mrs. L. B. Grist, 903 Bell Street, Montgomery, Alabama.

FORREST, LULU.—Brown before her marriage. Last seen in Blytheville, Arkansas. I should like to hear from you again. Della Helm, 422 West Curtis Street, Aberdeen, Washington.

HYMAN, JULIUS or JOHN ROBBINS.—Tall, thirty-nine years old, last heard of in Milan, Minnesota. Do relieve your mother's aching heart. Mrs. Pauline Hyman, 67 Tonnelle Avenue, North Bergen, New Jersey.

HOYLE, ETHEL.—I will forgive you, so please come back and bring Evelyn with you. Write to me in care of this magazine. Bill.

MORALEZ, TEODORO.—Born in Mexico City, thirty-nine years ago. Write to your brother, Cruz Moralez, Oak Creek, Colorado.

VERMAATEN, ANTON W.—Better known as "Vern." Twenty-six years old, medium height, wavy brown hair, blue eyes, scar on cheek. Information concerning him will be greatly appreciated by his mother, Mrs. Maud Vermaaten, 109 Orchard Lane, Columbus, Ohio.

WALTER P.—Peggy is so sweet. Please write. Sue P., 15½ Henry Street, Youngstown, Ohio.

BRIDGES, AILEEN, JOHNNIE, or EDNA.—Last seen in Los Angeles, California, ten years ago. I want to hear from you. Earl Helm, 422 West Curtis Street, Aberdeen, Washington.

VERNON, MRS. ANNE.—All is well. Please write to me, care of this magazine. J. McD.

HOWARD, WILLIAM KING.—Your children, Dorothea and Billy, want you to come home. Or write to their grandmother, Mrs. M. J. White, 519 North Third Street, Leavenworth, Kansas.

RICHARDSON, HOWARD H.—He was in Cincinnati, Ohio, and Covington, Kentucky, in 1912 and 1913. An old friend would like to hear from him. Ready to serve again. Box 177, Shelby, Ohio.

IVAN.—I am worried about you. Please write in care of Beulah. Love. Irene.

CHAMBERLAIN, CHARLES and MAUD.—Last heard from in Chico, California. I am very anxious to hear from you. Mrs. Aditha Hibbard, Box 363, Fellows, California.

PIPER, MARY.—Lived at Terrell, Texas, and worked at the Insane Hospital in 1907 and 1908. Later lived in Dallas, Texas. Please write to X. Y. Z., care of this magazine.

DICKY.—Darling, come home. I want you. Alice.

ORVILLE K.—Come home before it is too late. Mother failing fast. We all love and need you. Meldon K.

CAMPBELL, KATIE and BESSIE.—They were in Steel City, Nebraska, in 1906. Their mother married a man by the name of Baker. Katie is about twenty-five and Bessie about twenty-two. I would appreciate any information concerning them. James Campbell, Box 45, Leslie, Arkansas.

ROSE, BILL and ELDER, GEORGE.—Do you remember High and Broad Street, where you were before leaving for France with the Rainbow Division? Please write to your old friend Wickey, in care of this magazine.

DONOVAN, WILLIAM.—Married Elizabeth Ward in 1901, has a sister Lena and a brother Walter. Very important that I should get in touch with him. W. K. D., care of this magazine.

COLSTON, A. L.—Loo, dear, if you will only write or come back to Doreen and me, that will be all that we want. Your wife and child still love you a great deal. 25½ Thirty-sixth Place, Venice, Los Angeles, California.

TOWLE, WALTER.—Last heard of in Miami, Florida. His niece, formerly Mamie Kemp, would like to get in touch with him. Mrs. Joseph Boyle, 85 Pine Street, Dalton, Massachusetts.

ATTENTION.—Would very much like to hear from some of my comrades, who were with Company C, 27th U. S. Infantry at Ussuri and Spasskoe, Siberia. Charles H. Moore, 302 North Third Street, Marshall, Illinois.

BOOTH, BEATRICE, OLGA and GLADYS.—Taken from 470 College Street, Winnipeg, by the Children's Aid of Winnipeg. Please write to Mother, care of this magazine.

VALETA, ANNA, ROSIE and JOHN.—The children of Frank Valeta of California. Last heard of in Omaha, Nebraska, nine years ago. Their stepbrother will appreciate any information. H. W. Herman, U. S. S. "Medusa," San Pedro, California.

DUNAWAY, GEORGE.—Please write to your aunts, Cora and Daisy, 26 North Tenth Street, Phoenix, Arizona.

WOLKER, ELLA.—Last heard from in Cincinnati, Ohio, about twenty-seven years ago. Your sisters would like to hear from you. Cora and Daisy, 26 North Tenth Street, Phoenix, Arizona.

JOHNSON, WILLIE.—Sometimes called "Bud." Please write to us. Cora and Daisy, 26 North Tenth Street, Phoenix, Arizona.

CLARKE, JACK LEONARD.—Met you at Eureka Springs and Memphis. Later went to Atlanta, but could find no information about you through Latour. Write to me care of this magazine. A. C.

SPEECE, JOHN H.—Served in the Civil War in the Kentucky cavalry. Will any of his comrades or any one of the same name please write to me, as I am anxious to locate my father's people? John F. Speece, Box 135, Calumet City, Illinois.

DEGNER, BUSTER HOMEWOOD.—I must hear from you, so please write to your sister, Alice Marlow, 405 East Eighth Street, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

EARL.—Write me at once, or write Mary and Frank at Seminole, Oklahoma. Viola Murray, Arcadia, Louisiana.

BILLY.—I have something to tell you, so write me immediately. Kewpie, General Delivery, Coffeyville, Kansas.

HALL, M. M.—Passenger engineer for the Santa Fe. Disappeared in 1920. Medium height, light, about thirty-seven years old. Information greatly appreciated by his sister, Mrs. J. S. Daniel, Box 529, Stephensville, Texas.

WILSON, STUART.—He was last seen in Los Angeles, California, five years ago. Any one having his present address will confer a favor by notifying R. N. E., care of this magazine.

DOUGLAS, HILDA and **ARCHIE.**—They lived with Mrs. Patton in 1896. An old friend would like to hear from either of them. B., in care of this magazine.

HALL, HAROLD C.—He is a carpenter and also a tenor singer. He is five feet nine inches in height, has dark-brown hair, olive complexion, and weighs two hundred and ten pounds. If any one has any information about him please write to his sister, A. R., care of this magazine.

SMITH, IRENE.—She lived with her aunt, Mrs. Hannah Smith, and with her cousins, Hepsy and William Smith. She once lived at 51 Alberon Place and 9 Yates Street, Albany, New York. She is now married. Her cousin is very anxious to get in touch with her and would appreciate her present whereabouts. Mrs. Hannah Ellis, 3279 16th Street, San Francisco, California.

BENNETT, FRED.—He is an Indian from the State of New York, and was in the Marines in 1920. Please write to Alice, care of this magazine.

HANK.—Received same O. K., and you know you are forgiven. Can't say what I expect to do, as things are pretty well upset since you left. If you see this ad, please write and let us know how you are and what you are doing. Send mail to the same address. Love from Sister Irene.

DILLMAN, ALFRED HOWARD.—He is five feet nine inches in height, twenty-five years of age, has brown eyes and black hair. His main line of work is taking care of race horses. He was expected to go to Cuba, but was last heard of in New Orleans. Any one knowing his present address will kindly write to V. D., care of this magazine.

NEWBOLD.—He married Nellie Richardson in 1902, and was last heard of in Arkansas about 1903. Please send all information to his daughter, Mrs. Zella Grindley, 314 South Water Street, Champaign, Illinois.

GRELLA, JOSEPH.—He was a bugler with Troop M, 7th Cavalry, stationed at Fort Bliss, Texas, from 1915 to 1916. Went overseas with the Second Ammunition Train during the World War. His home address was Brooklyn, New York. Any one knowing his address will kindly write to an old buddy of his. B. T., care of this magazine.

WRIGHT, MAY.—She lived on Michigan Boulevard, Chicago, Illinois. Please write to your old friend Vic Kuey, 479 Gertrude Avenue, Fort Rouge, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.

NOTICE.—I would like to get in touch with any of my buddies of the World War who served with Battery D, 50th C. A. C. R. C. Smith, 415 Capitol Street, Charleston, West Virginia.

WHEELER, JOHN.—He was married to Jeanette Reanaulte in Alaska in 1901. Later his wife died. He was last heard of in Montreal, Canada, in 1905. His son is anxious to get in touch with him. Please write to Jack Reanaulte, Rocheport, Missouri.

HALE, BOBBIE.—Please write to me and let me know how you are, as I am very lonesome since I got back. I have hunted all over for you, written everywhere, but all of my letters have been returned. You remember me at Oklahoma City, don't you? Ray Stanphill, care of this magazine.

STOCK, ANNA.—I have not seen her since 1918. Any information will be greatly appreciated by Mrs. Charles Kaas, 827 Forest Avenue, Brooklyn, New York.

GRANT, PATRICK A.—He was formerly one of the State mine inspectors for the State of West Virginia, and later became mine superintendent for the Bethlehem Steel Company at Bretz, West Virginia. An old friend is very anxious to hear from him, as he has good news. Any one who has his present address kindly write to V. H., care of this magazine.

ERNSBORGER, GEORGE.—He is a machinist, and was last heard of in Dallas, Texas. He worked for the Southland Hotel. Please write to your wife, who is worried about you. Deary.

WALKER, TOM J.—Please get in touch with an old friend, Lillian, in care of this magazine.

WHITNOLL, FOSTER.—He is six feet two inches in height, has dark-brown hair, blue eyes, and weighs one hundred and sixty pounds. He wore a light-gray suit and light cap. His right eye is crooked. When last heard of he was living in Montreal, Canada. He is requested to write to his mother, who is ill, and also to his friend, Alfred C. Crowe, 205 North State Street, Westerville, Ohio.

LAMBERT, JAMES E.—He was last heard of in Twin Falls, Idaho. If any of the readers know him kindly notify C. J. Kyler, Juneau, Alaska.

MILLER, CHARLES FREDERICK.—He is six feet in height, has blue eyes and blond hair, and was formerly living in Payette, Idaho. Has relations in Wallace, Nebraska. His daughter has not seen him since she was three years of age. Any one knowing his present whereabouts will kindly write to Mrs. Alonzo Mason, Iola, Colorado.

GAULTIER, Mrs., or **NEWELL, CLARA,** of Kent, Washington.—She was last heard of ten years ago. Please write to your old chum, Mamie. Mrs. M. A. Bouchee, Livingston, Montana.

NOTICE.—I would like to hear from any of the girls who were working at the Mayside Hospital, Seattle, Washington, in 1899 and 1900. Mrs. M. A. Bouchee, Livingston, Montana.

MAC, from California.—Come for me as soon as possible. I love you, and you can trust me. I have not married again. Ellie.

WINTER, ANTON.—I would be grateful for any information of the descendants or relatives of Anton Winter, known to have settled somewhere in America, and to have come from Bavaria, Germany, many years ago. His sister and niece are anxious to hear from them. Mrs. A. J. Yancey, P. O. Box 271, Shafter, California.

SCHINNER.—Will any one of this name communicate with me. Am anxious to find relatives by this name. Mrs. A. J. Yancey, P. O. Box 271, Shafter, California.

KANE, JACK.—He is an iceman, and formerly lived at 2305 West Madison Street, Chicago, Illinois. Please write to your wife, so she will be able to know what to do about the whole affair. Elsie, care of this magazine.

TRETTEL, JOSEPH ROBERT.—He is a German, five feet nine and a half inches in height, and of medium build. Has small gray eyes and thick sandy hair. He was at South St. Paul, Minnesota, in January, 1925, and then left for the West, heading for Nevada. Any news of him would be greatly appreciated by his son, Albin H. Trettel, P. O. Box 304, Walker, Minnesota.

ULRICH, JOE.—He is a German, twenty years of age, five feet ten and a half inches in height, and of medium build. Has light-blue eyes, light hair and a high forehead. He left Minneapolis on April 1, 1925. Was last heard of at Denver, Colorado, one week later, and was then heading farther West. Any one knowing his present whereabouts will kindly notify Albin H. Trettel, P. O. Box 304, Walker, Minnesota.

SYLVIA S.—Last seen in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1925. Your cousin wishes to communicate with you. Kindly write to L. Y., care of this magazine.

VAN BUREN, KATHERINE.—She was last heard of in Chicago, Illinois. Left Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1905. She has three children, Elmer, Clarence, and Mary, and three brothers, John, Charley, and George Merriman. Her husband's name is Harry. Any one knowing her present address will confer a favor by writing to Clarence Van Buren, 141 Sixth Street, Long Island City, New York.

GILMOUR, HUGH.—He left Scotland about twenty-five years ago. Shortly after he was supposed to be in a sailor's home in Sydney, Australia, with a broken arm. His youngest sister, Agnes, now married, would like to hear from him. Please write to Mrs. C. McIbraney, Box 128, Iroquois Falls, Ontario, Canada.

STUART, ROBERT.—All will be well if you get in touch with me immediately by telephone at Edith's. Lovey.

WALTON, REECE, or **BLACKIE** or **SMOKY.**—Please let us know where you are, as we love you. The children and I want you to come home. Gladys Walton, Treece, Kansas.

WILSON, RUTH, formerly of Milwaukee, Wisconsin.—About three years ago she was attending Second Avenue School. Any one knowing her whereabouts will kindly communicate with Edward Lock, U. S. S. "Camden," care of the Postmaster, New York City.

JONES, JOHN W.—He was discharged as sergeant, Quartermaster Corps, Camp Lee, Virginia, July, 1919. Has brown eyes and brown, curly hair. Any news will be greatly appreciated by Mrs. Minnie Jones, 259 Monroe Street, Corvallis, Oregon.

CAMERON, E. H.—He is five feet nine inches in height, twenty-one years of age, has blue eyes, light-brown hair, and weighs one hundred and forty pounds. He left San Diego, California, July, 1926. Any one having any information will confer a favor by writing to his sister, Ethel Goodwin, P. O. Box 326, Flint, Michigan.

BUDDIES of Company B, 9th U. S. Infantry, 2d Division.—Please get in touch with Martin J. Fabey, 243 Douglas Street, Manchester, New Hampshire.

DANIELS, CONLEY or **U. C.**—He left his home in Virginia, January, 1925, to go to Florida. Later went to some Western State. He is a lumber inspector and also a dairyman. He is six feet in height, forty-six years of age, has brown eyes and hair, and weighs one hundred and fifty pounds. His chin is slightly dimpled. Any one who has any information about him will kindly write to Mrs. C. Daniels, Box 563, Crew, Virginia.

COLE, CHARLIE W.—He was last seen twenty years ago in Nebraska. His mother's name at the time was Julia Cummins. Please communicate with Mrs. D. C. McFagher, 905 Pacific, Bremerton, Washington.

KNIGHTON, LILA D.—Formerly lived in Altus, Oklahoma. Please write to Mrs. Emma Cline, P. O. Box 184, Southland, Texas.

BLAUVELT.—I would like to hear from some of the relatives of Daniel Blauvelt, formerly of Haverstraw, New York, or of Pete Blauvelt. Send mail to Walter A. Blauvelt, Milton, Washington.

$10.80 For All Three

9 FT x 12 FT CONGOLEUM GENUINE GOLD SEAL ART RUG

With Two Extra Congoleum Rugs

$1.00 DOWN

Clip the coupon below. Write your name and address plainly. Pin a dollar bill to it — mail at once. We will ship immediately—all three rugs on approval in one complete neat package. No trouble to lay. **If satisfactory, just send a dollar a month.**

Order by No. M4C2521. Background of mellow two-tone taupe. This jaspe, or water-silk effect has large, colorful figure in all of ...r corners. Stunning wide banded border with richly colored figures.

30 Days Free Trial

Not just one rug, but three! Three Genuine Gold Seal Congoleum Art Rugs! The prettiest and most artistic Congoleum Rug pattern ever produced. A brand new pattern, never before shown — a pattern of exquisite style, perfect taste, lovely colorings.

A great, big, beautiful, room size 9 foot by 12 foot Genuine Congoleum Art Rug, and two companion rugs to match. **All three Rugs for TEN DOLLARS AND EIGHTY CENTS.**

Thrifty Credit

You might almost say—All three for ONE DOLLAR! One dollar down—one dollar a month. **Simply pin a dollar bill to the coupon** – about a year to pay afterwards, easily and conveniently. Beauty, utility, home comfort; housekeeping satisfaction that no housekeeper **should miss,** for the odd dollar now and then she will **never miss.**

Guaranteed Genuine Gold Seal Congoleum **Art Rugs!** All three Art Rugs bear the famous Congoleum Art Rug Gold Seal—the famous Gold Seal that can't be placed on "seconds," or damaged goods, or imitations.

The Gold Seal means complete satisfaction or money back. No **ifs, ands or buts** about THAT.

Congoleum is the **only** guaranteed floor covering. Congoleum is the floor covering **that changed the housekeeping habits of a nation.**

Here it is offered to you, in all its loveliness, in all its brand newness of pattern, in all its practical utility—**for little more than a ten dollar bill!**

Millions of homes are justly proud of their Congoleum floors. Heretofore they have paid a great deal more to obtain them. Homes that own Congoleum floors no longer know the back-breaking, heart-breaking drudgery of scrubbing floors.

All this for ten dollars and eighty cents, spread over a year's time. Ten dollars and eighty cents on approval — ON A YEAR'S CREDIT.

Shop around and make comparisons. Go wherever Congoleum is sold—and Congoleum is sold everywhere.

Bear in mind that our price includes two beautiful companion Rugs—Genuine Gold Seal Art Rugs. Our price is a CREDIT price – you pay little by little.

Simply pin a dollar bill to the coupon, write your name and address, and mail at once.

GOLD SEAL CONGOLEUM GUARANTEE SATISFACTION GUARANTEED OR YOUR MONEY BACK

Waterproof—No Seams—Lies Flat—Never Curls Up—No Scrubbing

Spiegel May, Stern Co.

No orders filled in cities of 100,000 population or more.

1116 West 55th Street, Chicago

Ask for FREE Catalog

It shows thousands of bargains. It brings credit without asking. Everything from cellar to garret always sent on free trial for a month.

Beds—Bedding—Carpets—Rugs—Dishes—Cooking Utensils—Curtains Furniture—Lamps. Also Diamonds, Watches, Jewelry. All sorts of odds and ends for the home. Your request on a postcard is enough.

PIN A DOLLAR TO COUPON BELOW.

Spiegel, May, Stern Co.
1116 West 35th Street, Chicago

I enclose **$1** for **9 ft. x 12 ft. Congoleum rug and two extra companion Congoleum rugs each 18 inches x 36 inches —Offer No. M4C2521**—all on 30 days' free trial. If I return them, you are to refund my dollar, also all transportation costs. Otherwise I will pay **$1.00** monthly, until special price of **$10.80** is paid.

Name .....

Street or R. F. D. or Box No. .....

Post Office ..... *State* .....

Shipping Point .....

If You Wish a Free Copy of Our Big Catalog, Put a Cross (X) In This Square ☐

JANUARY 22, 1927
VOL. LXVI No. 5
★ WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE 15 Cents

H A V E A

C A M E L

Smoking refreshment that never ends

WHY is it that the enjoyment of Camels never fails? That you can light them all day and far into the night with never a loss of smoothness, mildness and incomparable fragrance? It's simply a question of quality. Camels contain the choicest Turkish and Domestic tobaccos grown. Camels are given an expert blending found in no other cigarette.

First thing in the morning. Late at night. Before or after breakfast, lunch or dinner. Light Camels as liberally as you choose, one after the other, as often as you desire the cheering comfort of a smoke. You will get always the refreshing thrill of smoking pleasure.

Camel perfection has resulted in a demand that has never been known before or since. There has never been a cigarette popularity that could compare with Camel's. Each year, millions of experienced smokers, who are willing to pay any price for quality, find in Camels every good thing they've ever wanted in a cigarette.

Here's a smoke invitation that's leading millions to an entirely new conception of cigarette contentment—

"Have a Camel!"

R. J. REYNOLDS TOBACCO COMPANY, WINSTON-SALEM, N. C.

©1927